

# THE PIRATE QUEEN

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May 2019

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis contains the critical introduction and the full text of my original science fiction novel, *The Pirate Queen*. The critical introduction details the literary, theoretical, and historical influences that led to the creation of my novel. Among these influences are the *Star Wars* original trilogy and the prequels, the historical figure of Grace O'Malley of Ireland, Audre Lorde's concept of the female erotic as power, and romance as represented in Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor* and Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass* series. My introduction argues that *The Pirate Queen* uses the space opera genre and these influences to create a feminist representation of power and romance in the setting of the space opera, positioning femininity as a source of strength for the main protagonist, Grace O'Malley.

The next portion of my thesis is my creative work, *The Pirate Queen*, a space opera centered around the romance between Captain Grace 'Granuaile' O'Malley and Captain Caleb Lewis. Dashing pirate outlaw Grace 'Granuaile' O'Malley travels the galaxy, fighting in the Rebellion against the Terran Republic and eluding capture by Captain Caleb Lewis of the Terran Republic's Star Navy. Caleb and Grace are mortal enemies, the key players in the upcoming war between the Republic and Queen Elizabeth's Rebellion. Unfortunately, they're in also in love.

The novel begins with the realization that Caleb and Grace were once childhood best friends in Lawrence, Kansas, the beginnings of an attraction that has remained in spite of their positions on opposite sides of a war. Jumping across time and planets, from Lawrence, Kansas, to the Planet Daarhuur, *The Pirate Queen* establishes multiple confrontations between Grace and Caleb, where they realize the full power of their connection. In the end, Grace and Caleb will have to confront their feelings for each other and determine if love is enough to alter their paths, and the fate of the galaxy itself

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the queens who have driven me to create this story. The friends, family, and role models who told me never to back down, who helped me write fearlessly and love recklessly.

Do not ever shrink yourself to make room for someone else. Do not ever be afraid of your own power.

Brenna, Sarah, Taylor Swift, Carol Danvers, Natasha Romanov, Diana of Themyscira, Dana Alexa, Beyoncé...

And the Pirate Queen herself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee: Susan, Jason, Felice, and Sara. Thank you for believing in a ridiculous, fun, space romance. Thank you for laughing at my jokes and never complaining about length. You all are the best part of my experience at Texas A&M.

Thank you to the writers who taught me to tell stories: Sarah J. Maas, Rainbow Rowell, Stuart Hill, Cinda Williams Chima, Tamora Pierce, Stan Lee, JK Rowling, and George Lucas. Your stories are always a part of me. Thank you for adventure and magic and badass queens with swords.

Thank you to the soundtrack of this novel, the artists who helped me tell this story. Waterparks, As It Is, Taylor Swift, All Time Low, Lorde, Mayday Parade, Jason Derulo, Little Mix, Ariana Grande, and Beyoncé. Thank you for drama and grandeur and daring. Thank you for emergency dance parties and late-night jam sessions.

In particular, I want to thank J.K. Rowling and the *Harry Potter* series, the constant heartbeat of everything I've ever written in the realm of science fiction and fantasy. Thank you for teaching me about the redemptive power of true love. Thank you for "Always."

Finally, thank you to my friends and family for their continued love and support. Mom, I love you so much and I'm so amazed by how strong, beautiful, and faithful you are every single day. Jeremiah and Joseph, we are the J Team everyone else wishes they were.

Brenna, I'm so glad that I moved into your house when we were seven. You are the kindest, fiercest person I've ever known, and my best friend in the entire world. Thank you for being a real-life Disney princess. Thank you for reading my stories even though you hate reading and always offering a sympathetic ear every time I do something stupid. I love you so much.

Sarah, we emerged out of Work Hell together. Thank you so much for being such hype-man, and introducing me to *Shards of Honor*. You are unfailingly funny and one of my favorite people to talk to. Thank you for being so supportive and brave and crying over gay fanfiction with me. I love you and I hope we survive Endgame.

Finally, thank you to the band that encompasses adventure, drama, mystery, intrigue, and true love: One Direction.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

This thesis was supervised by the committee of Dr. Susan Stabile (chair), Dr. Sara DiCaglio (member), from the Department of English, and Dr. Felice House (member).

There were no other student contributors for this thesis than the student, Jasmina S Kuenzli.

There are no outside funding sources related to the research and compilation of this thesis.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*The Pirate Queen* is a space opera that places the historical figure of Grace O'Malley in a universe of epic space battles, romantic love, and intricate power struggles. The historical, fictional, and theoretical scaffold that I used to engineer the story offers a glimpse into the thought process that led to the creation of *The Pirate Queen*. The historical figure of Grace O'Malley, the space opera subgenre as represented in *Star Wars*, and the contemporary romances in Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass* series and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor* inspired the characters, setting, and style of *The Pirate Queen*. I draw theoretical insight for a queer feminist concept of power and heroism from Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and Veronica Hollinger's essay "(Re) Reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender." What emerges is *The Pirate Queen*, a space opera which follows the conventions of the subgenre in terms of scale and worldbuilding, offers a new take on the historical perspective of Grace O'Malley and Queen Elizabeth I, and develops a romance between Grace O'Malley and Captain Caleb Lewis based upon mutual trust and equality, establishing a specifically feminine understanding of power.

The space opera remains an essential element of science fiction in spite of constant criticism of the subgenre's lack of scientific basis and naive emphasis on romance and adventure (Westfahl 181). The genre of science fiction offers ample room for social and philosophical commentary, as well as a place to speculate about possible advancements in science and their effects on society. As a subgenre characterized by a lack of distinct social commentary as well as little or no explanation of the advanced scientific apparatuses that enable space travel, critics argue that the space opera subgenre undermines the aspirations of science fiction. Hugo

Gernsback, the editor of the *Amazing Stories* science fiction magazine from 1936-29, complained that the forerunners of the space opera subgenre did “not even attempt to fulfill the goals of scientific and literary excellence” (qtd. in Westfahl 178).

Critics took issue with the romantic element of the space opera genre in part because romance was associated with feminine tastes. In 1941, Bob Tucker coined the term ‘space opera’ by comparing the subgenre to the melodrama, romance, and lack of literary or scientific value of the feminine soap opera (Matzke 18). Justine Larbalestier argues that the argument against romance in science fiction (and the space opera subgenre as a result) was part of an effort to exclude women from the science fiction genre as both authors and readers. “The equivalence between ‘women’ and ‘love interest’ disqualifies women from the field of science fiction, since love belongs to the field of romance” (qtd. in Matzke 6). The incorrectness of such an assumption was evident from the beginning; women have always made up a significant portion of the readership and authorship of science fiction, regardless of the subgenre.

In spite of efforts to exclude and eliminate the space opera, the subgenre remains one of science fiction’s most popular forms. Perhaps the romance, melodrama, and adventure are exactly what appeals to readers. Hugo Westfahl suggests that the space opera gives readers a “vacation” from the aspirations of traditional science fiction (183). It’s emphasis on love stories and adventure might be exactly what have made the genre so pervasive.

Typically, space operas contain robotic friends of the main characters, the use of hyperspace for interstellar travel, an evil totalitarian empire that rules the galaxy, and a band of rebels that fights against the empire. The scale and setting of the space opera also creates a “wild west” or “frontier” atmosphere; space operas typically follow a hero or a set of heroes through a series of conflicts throughout the galaxy (178). The heroes encounter challenges caused not only

by the overarching fight against a totalitarian regime, but also the individual characters and settings that they face as they travel. Numerous science fiction works from the 1930's onward included some or all of these elements, including Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series of the 1950's, which introduced both robotic companions and a Galactic Empire (Westfahl 180).

In 1977, George Lucas' *Star Wars* combined all of these elements into the "quintessential space opera" (Westfahl 180). The *Star Wars* franchise now includes films, video games, spinoff television shows, and hundreds of novelizations, and remains an enduring element of both the science fiction genre as well as pop culture more generally. For the purposes of this critical introduction, I will be using the novelizations of the *Star Wars* original trilogy (*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *The Return of the Jedi*), and the prequels (*The Phantom Menace*, *The Attack of the Clones*, and *The Revenge of the Sith*) as a guide for the conventions of the space opera genre. While my work draws from *Star Wars* in its description of setting, scale, and worldbuilding, *The Pirate Queen* also offers a feminist queer critique on the development of female characters and lack of queer representation in the series.

*Star Wars* thrives precisely because of the massive scale of the 'galaxy far, far away.' Each installment is an episode in the overall story arc, which offers its own specific plot, setting, and conflict. And since there is so much opportunity within the galaxy, a great deal of *Star Wars* happens offstage as well as onstage. For example, Anakin and Obi-Wan establish themselves as heroes in *The Clone Wars*, which occurs between *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*. Likewise, the reader comes into *Empire Strikes Back* in the middle of the growing sexual tension between Leia Organa and Han Solo. As a result, *Star Wars* has its own overarching narrative arc related to the ongoing war between the Jedi-backed Rebellion and the Sith-backed Empire, but each episode also stands alone as its own miniature narrative. The scale of the series, a caveat of

the space opera genre, provides the opportunity for supporting character arcs and subplots that fit seamlessly into the overall series.

Because *The Pirate Queen* uses the romance between Grace and Caleb as the fulcrum around which the rest of the plot pivots, the episodic narrative is condensed into individual, nonlinear chapters so that the reader feels the weight of the past with each encounter between the characters. As childhood best friends who are now mortal enemies, Grace and Caleb's relationship is characterized by the pressure and tension of time. Both have to grapple not only with the direct conflict of the current situation, but also the impact of all of that history. In order to fully communicate the way that Grace and Caleb juggle between the past and the present every time they face each other, the novel begins with the meeting where Caleb realizes Grace's true identity and jumps forward and backward over a decade's span.

The use of the nonlinear narrative not only establishes a look at Grace and Caleb's relationship in a manner similar to the way the characters view it, but it also raises questions about identity formation for each character. Are Grace and Caleb's current identities intertwined with their relationship as children? Is this history enough to overcome the divisions that now separate them? Is the connection between them worth the conflict it incites?

*Star Wars* not only inspired the overall genre and structure of *The Pirate Queen*, but also its narration style. Because each episode can take place in any part of the galaxy, the first paragraph of each chapter provides the necessary setting for the reader. This visual rendering of the setting invites a cinematic experience, where the reader descends from a broad view of the landscape to the characters that inhabit it. For example, in *The Phantom Menace*, Terry Brooks opens with a description of the planet Tatooine:

Tatooine. The suns burned down out of a cloudless blue sky, washing the vast desert wastes of the planet in a brilliant white light. The resultant glare rose off the flat, sandy surface in a wet shimmer of blistering heat to fill the gaps between the massive cliff faces and solitary outcroppings of the mountains that were the planet's distinguishing feature (7).

Brooks' description introduces the new setting and narrows as it focuses on the characters in the story. The reader observes the landscape in a manner that evokes the distinct cinematography of the films while also being grounded into the specific parameters of the upcoming conflict. In Tatooine, the harsh landscape provides the backdrop for Anakin's struggle for freedom.

*The Pirate Queen* uses a similar narration style in its description of each new planet or scene. For example, "Chapter 3: Plutropolis" begins with a view of the city from space:

The sprawling city conglomerate of Plutropolis was bright and vibrant enough to pulse even from orbit—a mass of white lights that looked like stars scattered across the planet's deep blue surface. As the leading planet in technological advancement, Pluto's population was intent on showcasing its talent, illustrating its power and innovation from the moment ships arrived within sight of the surface (Kuenzli 60).

As a result, the reader receives a vivid illustration of the setting that also introduces the conflict that will face the characters in that chapter. Where Tatooine's harsh landscape represents the intense and devastating circumstances surrounding Anakin's struggle for freedom, the sublime beauty of Plutropolis foreshadows the slave trade it exploits to maintain its technical prominence. My paragraph emphasizes the planet's own allure to establish the Plutonians' emphasis on appearance and their key role in trade with the Republic causes the Terran Republic to overlook the horror of the slave trade.

Like Palpatine's Republic in the *Star Wars* prequels, the galaxy of *The Pirate Queen* is governed by a corrupt and inefficient democracy become a dictatorship. Admiral Ness Lee orchestrated a military takeover of the Terran Republic, which had been a constitutional monarchy led by Queen Elizabeth's family. Admiral Lee presents himself as the strong hand the

Republic needs in order to maintain peace and prosperity. Queen Elizabeth, the only surviving member of the royal family, leads a Rebellion on the fringes of the galaxy.

The romance between Captain Caleb Lewis and Captain Grace ‘Granuaile’ O’Malley, as the focus of the novel, grounds the battle between the Republic and the Rebellion. Caleb’s father is the Commander of the Star Navy, and Caleb maintains a strong sense of loyalty to Admiral Lee. Caleb believes that the Republic is a force for good, in spite of its faults. Like many of the other citizens in the Republic, Caleb disapproves of some of Lee’s tactics but wants to maintain the overall status quo. Caleb’s relationship with Grace forces him to confront his own complicity in the Republic’s totalitarian brutality.

*The Pirate Queen* critically engages with the romantic elements in *Star Wars*, especially in regards to the characters of Padmé Amidala and Leia Organa. While *Star Wars* has much to laud in terms of its two main female protagonists, it still views traditional femininity, especially in regards to romance, marriage, and children, as fundamentally incompatible with a woman’s political or military leadership. *The Pirate Queen* resists the separation of femininity from power that occurs so prevalently in the *Star Wars* series, reimagining femininity as an aspect of power itself.

In the prequel trilogy, Padmé Amidala’s entire identity is absorbed into her relationship with Anakin Skywalker and her status as the eventual mother of Luke and Leia. Even before Padmé falls in love with Anakin, her numerous intellectual and political (masculine) accomplishments are undercut with references to her traditionally feminine qualities. By *Revenge of the Sith*, Padmé Amidala is “the youngest-ever elected Queen of her planet, a daring partisan guerilla, and a measured, articulate, and persuasive voice of reason in the Republic Senate” (Stover 745). But Padmé’s “inmost reality, the most fundamental, unbreakable core of her being”

is her status as “Anakin Skywalker’s wife” (Stover 745). A queen, a senator, and a rebel, Padmé is still ultimately defined in terms of her relationship to a man.

Likewise, the original trilogy continually places Leia’s femininity at odds with her leadership of the rebellion. Han Solo tells Leia “You’ve been so busy giving orders, you’ve forgotten how to be a woman” (Glut 271). Even when Leia is revealed as the last hope to defeat Darth Vader, she still perceives herself as a mere princess. “She had no power; the power was elsewhere. She could only help and succor and support” (Kahn 605). Throughout the series, *Star Wars* seems to indicate that leadership, military prowess, and heroism itself are masculine traits, and a woman who engages with them is not fully a woman at all.

The issue of heroism’s compatibility with womanhood brings into play the historical influences of *The Pirate Queen*. Grace O’Malley of Ireland, also known as “Granuaile” or “The Pirate Queen,” was a pirate captain who operated out of Ireland’s Clare Bay from around 1547 to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century (Cook 178). *The Pirate Queen*’s characterization of Grace owes much to representations of Grace O’Malley as “a flamboyant, dashing outlaw” who gambled and fought alongside her men (Cook x). Sir Richard Bingham, the English governor of Connaught, called O’Malley “the most notorious woman on all the western coasts, a notable traitress and the nurse of all rebellions in the province for 40 years” (qtd. in Cook ix). Grace O’Malley remains an important mythic figure in Irish folklore and is typically referred to by her biographers as a “feminist icon,” especially in contrast with her contemporary Queen Elizabeth I of England (Chambers x).

Captain Grace ‘Granuaile’ O’Malley was captain of her own ship, *The Sea Queen*, as well as the commander of an entire fleet. The heir to the O’Malley Clan, O’Malley expanded her family’s tradition of piracy into a full enterprise, operating out of Clare Bay from her late teens

well into her sixties (Cook 35). When O'Malley was married in a clan alliance to Donal O'Flaherty in her late teens, she managed to take control of the O'Flaherty Clan while her husband involved himself in petty clan disputes. After her husband's death, in spite of the fact that O'Malley had no legal claim to the O'Flaherty land or his men, she became the unquestioned leader of the O'Flahertys (Cook 43). "Throughout Grace's life, even well into her sixties, there is no record of any man under her command turning against her or losing his faith in her" (Chambers 80). Grace O'Malley of *The Pirate Queen* echoes the historical figure's military leadership and fearsome reputation.

*The Pirate Queen* also reimagines Grace O'Malley's relationship with Queen Elizabeth of England. While O'Malley was the scourge of many of the English lord deputies of Ireland, she was more than willing to submit to Queen Elizabeth's rule as long as she was allowed to keep her fleet (Cook 13). In fact, O'Malley once famously met with Queen Elizabeth after her fleet had been seized by Lord Deputy Sir Richard Bingham. This legendary "Meeting of the Two Queens" has been styled in much of Irish folklore as O'Malley gaining the upper hand over the English queen (Chambers 117). While Queen Elizabeth clearly had more power in reality, the meeting did result in Queen Elizabeth directing the Lord Deputy to return O'Malley's title and lands "under the guise of 'fighting the queen's quarrel with all the world'" (O'Malley, qtd. in Cook 141). Legend has it that O'Malley was once captured and, while the noose was around her neck, a rider came bearing Queen Elizabeth's official pardon (Cook x).

*The Pirate Queen* reimagines the tension that developed when O'Malley, an Irish pirate, ostensibly declared loyalty to the English Crown while continuing to operate with impunity. Within the galaxy of *The Pirate Queen*, Grace O'Malley still tends to take as much for herself as what she steals for the queen. Because of Queen Elizabeth's precarious status in the galaxy and



Grace's reputation, the pirate queen gets away with these infractions. Grace and Elizabeth's relationship is one of begrudging respect formed by mutual necessity, and therefore somewhat more egalitarian than that of the historical figures.

Biographers present Queen Elizabeth and O'Malley as foils, powerful women who navigated a similar patriarchal landscape in distinctly different ways. While Queen Elizabeth was styled as the Virgin Queen and famously never married or had children, Grace O'Malley fought alongside her men and had two husbands, several children, and a slew of lovers. Because "Granuaile succeeded in competing within the male-oriented environment in which she operated without appearing to jettison her femininity," Anne Chambers represents her as "the exemplification of a true feminist" (x). Chambers and other biographers consider Queen Elizabeth a less feminist queen, a foil for Grace that represents the typical masculine-oriented path to power.

The social landscape of *The Pirate Queen*, especially among the pirates and the rebels, is markedly different than that of 16<sup>th</sup> Century England and Ireland. As a result, it offers an opportunity to reimagine the power dynamics with both Queen Elizabeth and Grace O'Malley. In addition to anticipating a more egalitarian society on Earth by 2048, this novel suggests that intergalactic societies composed of both human beings and alien species would dismantle white heteropatriarchal norms of power. As a result, Queen Elizabeth and Grace O'Malley of *The Pirate Queen* are not subject to the gendered concepts of power and limitations of the English monarchy in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

However, Elizabeth and Grace are still different people, and therefore exercise different strengths in their efforts to maintain power. Elizabeth's methods of consolidating and maintaining power are still markedly different than those of Grace O'Malley. Unlike Grace, who

fearlessly pursues romantic relationships and launches herself into open battle, Elizabeth holds back from romantic attachments and prefers to command the field of battle from afar, employing her clever diplomacy to recruit people to her cause. As the leader of the Rebellion, Elizabeth operates with the constant threat of being discovered and overtaken by Admiral Lee's much larger forces. She directs an underground Rebellion, one characterized not by grand displays of force or entrenched fortifications but by rapid interstellar travel, propaganda, and guerilla warfare. In both cases, Grace and Elizabeth's pursuit of power is shaped by their individual experiences, identities, and strengths.

Grace's identity as a bisexual woman of color also offers its own comment on white, heteropatriarchal concepts of power and the more egalitarian landscape that *The Pirate Queen* pushes for. While the Terran Republic does not have the exact same white heteropatriarchal limitations of power that occupy American society today, systemic inequality is still present. The death of Grace's parents and Grace's failure to get into the Academy indicates that inequality still persists along these same gender and racial lines. Grace does not get into the Academy because as a woman of color, she and her parents were always suspected of criminal activity. Caleb's offer to use his own influence to get Grace into the Academy indicates that Caleb's status as both a white, upper class man and the son of the Commander gives him a measure of power that Grace does not occupy. And Caleb, whose privilege is unquestioned and implicit, is never fully aware of the obstacles Grace faces.

While Grace faces these barriers to power and influence on Earth, they are not so apparent in the wider world of the galaxy, especially in the world of piracy. The Terran Republic is based out of what used to be the United States. It therefore possesses the same issues with race, gender, and sexuality that continue to plague the social and political landscape of the

United States. The makeup of the Academy and the sailors it graduates remains predominantly white, upper class human beings. Non-humans are typically not recruited into the Academy unless they possess exceptional potential.

As a conglomeration of outlaws from all over the galaxy, pirate crews are typically composed of both human beings and aliens. Earth-related constructs of humanity, especially in terms of heteropatriarchal power constructions, are significantly weaker. Pirates form their own sort of society negotiated by the relationships in front of them as much as the influences of whatever planet they hail from. As a result, Grace does not face the same obstacles to power as a pirate that she would as a sailor in the Star Navy. She rises to the captaincy because of alliances with key members of the crew, encouragement from her mentor Captain Paladin, and because her crew truly considers her the best person for the job.

While Grace finds herself attracted to both men and women on Earth, the underlying heteropatriarchal social structures as well as her crush on Caleb do not allow her to fully accept or understand her attraction to women. On *The Pirate Queen*, Grace falls in love with a female Hidari, Dominya. Grace comes to terms with her bisexual identity in the environment of *The Pirate Queen*. On the Terran Republic, heteropatriarchal limitations on gender and sexuality remain implicit and embedded. *The Pirate Queen* not only allows Grace to attain a status of power she may never have reached on Earth, but also provides a safe place for Grace to realize her bisexuality. As a bisexual woman of color, a pirate captain, and a rebel, Grace's character enables me to push against heteropatriarchal constructions of femininity and power.

*The Pirate Queen's* defiance of limited gender roles and its emphasis on femininity as a source of power draws upon Audre Lorde's essay, "Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" from her collection *Sister Outsider*. I use this essay to explain my drive to create a feminine

understanding of power, one that does not rest upon traditionally heteropatriarchal or masculine concepts of empowerment, but rather draws from the unconscious, the feeling, and the feminine. In particular, Grace's status as a Pirate Queen, and the more egalitarian landscape that she occupies, pushes back against the notion that a woman must deny the feminine, affective, and emotional aspects of the self in order to appear "strong."

According to Lorde, "the erotic is a resource within each of us that lives in a deeply familial and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling" (53). The association of power and leadership as cold, calculating, and masculine creates a zero sum game for a woman attempting to become empowered according to those standards. "It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong" (53). It not only limits the power that the woman can find externally by forcing her to ascribe to a system that silences a vital part of her identity, but also limits the capacity for power inside herself.

In *Star Wars* and in other works of literature that appear to have empowered female characters, the suppression of the female erotic fundamentally undercuts the work's drive towards feminine empowerment. If the author silences the feminine, the affective, and the unconscious in their "strong" female character, then they are merely reinforcing the traditionally masculine aspects of power. As a result, many of these empowered female characters, including Leia and Padmé, find their more traditionally feminine qualities—physical beauty, romantic relationships, or motherhood—fundamentally incompatible with their status as political or military leaders.

The biographers of Grace O'Malley similarly affirm distinctly female empowerment in their portrayal of O'Malley as a true feminist who took lovers, married, had children, and fought

alongside her men all at once. As a Virgin Queen, Elizabeth had to diminish her femininity in order to maintain her grip on power. The landscape of *The Pirate Queen* enables me to create a new Queen Elizabeth—one who does not have a masculine definition of power limiting her choices. Instead, Queen Elizabeth of *The Pirate Queen* draws her power, like Grace, from how she understands herself as a woman, rather than attempting to appear masculine in order to maintain her power. While Grace's and Elizabeth's power look different, both are drawn from Lorde's concept of the female erotic: the use of passion, desire, and the indefinable and subjective understanding of womanhood.

*The Pirate Queen* also works beyond the male and female binaries that often cause female characters to be trapped beneath the gendered expectations of women. Lorde conceives of the erotic as that which “guides us to our deepest knowledge” of ourselves, emphasizing the departure from associating only sexuality with the erotic (56). Lorde argues that relegating the erotic to female sexuality diminishes the full value of feminine power. Instead, the erotic comes in a valorization of desire itself, whether that desire is for power, love, sex, or truth (54). “Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed for bed which I enter gratefully and rise up empowered” (55). Lorde reimagines her work as a bed, connecting female sexuality with a wider understanding of the erotic. According to Lorde, the erotic is about asserting the empowerment of women through all aspects of life: “our language, our history, our dancing, our loving” (55).

The empowered female characters in *The Pirate Queen* affirm Lorde's definition of the erotic: the affective, the feeling, the unconscious, and the feminine. In the novel, this often involves the use of psychological tactics instead of violence and brutality to subjugate the opponents of the Rebellion. According to a masculine concept of power and domination, the

power is established through physical strength and merciless destruction. This concept of domination forms the basis of Admiral Lee's Terran Republic, which is ruled through a combination of intimidation, corruption, and violence.

The female characters that lead the Rebellion offer a distinctively feminine concept of empowerment. Due to her relationship with Dominya, Grace refuses to resort to the bombing tactics of the Republic, valuing Dominya's refusal to facilitate terror and collateral damage over the power she might gain with such tactics. Likewise, Elizabeth stages the attack on Apollinia at the close of the novel not as wanton destruction, but as a smokescreen for Grace's mission to steal the plans for one of Admiral Lee's latest fleets. Instead of using the typical masculine path to power—brutality in order to conquer and oppress, Elizabeth's vision for victory is based on outsmarting and outmaneuvering the enemy.

However, the affirmation of empowerment in a specifically feminine form does risk simply recreating traditional gender binaries. In Veronica Hollinger's essay, "(Re) Reading Queerly...", she warns that "an emphasis on gender risks the continuous reinforcement of sexual binarism..." (24). Hollinger proposes that by associating gender and sexuality as universal identifications, the work is often trapped beneath the very conventions it attempts to transcend. In particular, Hollinger argues that strict gender definitions tend to result in compulsory heterosexuality in literature. By essentializing women in terms of their availability to men, sexuality becomes another element of control by the white heteropatriarchy.

Hollinger argues that science fiction offers the opportunity to interrogate norms of gender and sexuality. Even so, heteronormativity remains science fiction's "default setting" (Hollinger). Not only is this lack of representation an inaccurate representation of society, but the heterosexual binary undermines much of the feminism that happens in science fiction because it

continues to inscribe gender and sexuality in strictly heteropatriarchal terms (Hollinger 24). Furthermore, the erasure of queer characters has a harmful effect on readers because it reinforces the marginalization of queer identities that exists in our own society. In other epic science fiction and fantasy stories, queer characters, especially queer characters of color, are rarely represented as the heroes of the series, if they exist at all.

In line with Judith Butler's views on the subject, Hollinger suggests that science fiction authors use queer theory to interrogate the feminine/masculine divide and its inevitable heteronormativity. "Queering" science fiction will result in the deconstruction of these implicit assumptions, emphasizing the range of differences in sexual orientation and gender (Hollinger 33). This new type of feminist politics will "contest the very reifications of gender and identity" (Butler, qtd. in Hollinger 23).

Audre Lorde's concept of the female erotic also has implications regarding society's narrow definitions of race, gender, and sexuality, particularly in the way these categories have been used to guarantee women's availability to men. As a black lesbian feminist, Lorde's perspective is particularly useful when navigating acceptable standards of female sexuality. Lorde continually emphasizes society's efforts to dehumanize or erase women whose identities do not fit white heteropatriarchal standards of femininity. For Lorde, the suppression of the erotic operates precisely along these lines.

As a work featuring a heterosexual romance, *The Pirate Queen* works to avoid slipping into the issue of compulsory heterosexuality, especially for Grace O'Malley. Grace's identity as a bisexual woman of color pushes back against the traditional notions of heroism and femininity and allows for me to communicate the importance of queer representation in science fiction. While *The Pirate Queen* does not offer a world entirely devoid of the constructions of gender

and sexuality that exist in our society, it does offer queer and gender representation that defies, complicates, and problematizes these constructions. Grace's queerness pushes back against the heteronormative constructions of identity, gender representation, and heroism itself.

In *The Pirate Queen*, the romance that occurs between Grace and Dominya during their years together on *The Sea Queen* indicates Grace's departure from the limitations on her power imposed by the Terran Republic. After escaping from Earth, Grace encounters Dominya on *The Sea Queen* after the latter is rescued by Captain Paladin. Dominya is Grace's first real romantic relationship, a bond formed by mutual experience and attraction that becomes intense and alluring. On *The Sea Queen*, Grace comes into her own as a woman and realizes her sexuality.

Grace and Dominya fall in love, but they do not understand each other well enough for their relationship to survive. Grace's refusal to fully tell Dominya the circumstances of her escape, along with her reemerging feelings for Caleb, breaks their relationship apart. Even so, Grace's relationship with Dominya is a vital part of her captaincy on *The Sea Queen*. Not only does their relationship help cement the support Grace needs to maintain her role as captain, but Grace chooses certain tactics based upon how they will affect her relationship with Dominya. In spite of the dissolution of their relationship, Grace and Dominya still love each other, and their relationship is a vital part of the person she has become. My creation of the relationship between Grace and Dominya illustrates Grace's departure from the traditional standards of female sexuality and heroism. With Grace O'Malley, *The Pirate Queen* presents a heroine who transcends the white, heteropatriarchal limitations of power.

The ultimate manifestation of the erotic as a source of power comes in the way Grace's love for Caleb defies the cold, rational brutality of masculine constructions of power. Grace offers Caleb the opportunity of capturing her by providing him with a signal code that will



immediately summon her to him, knowing that he can easily use it to construct a trap. This act is a direct challenge to the masculine power tactics that characterize the Terran Republic and Caleb's own concept of power.

Grace's offer to 'save' Caleb reverses the passive/active roles assigned to male and female characters in the heterosexual romance, and the ones that appear to operate in the scene itself. Typically, the female character takes a more passive role, and the male character is the active agent of her rescue or salvation. This scene observes Grace gaining the upper hand over Caleb in combat, only to have her effectively relinquish it by giving him her signal code. Grace's action appears to undermine the very dominance she has asserted

However, Grace reconstitutes her surrender as an offer of Caleb's salvation, an act which reasserts her power and affirms *The Pirate Queen's* commitment to a feminine concept of power. Grace calls upon not her own ability to defeat Caleb in combat as the means for his surrender, but his feelings for her. "I know you're still in there...I will always come for you" (Kuenzli 257). Grace reverses the passivity that her surrender of her signal code implies, positioning it instead as the source of Caleb's salvation. Even as Grace gives Caleb the means to her own destruction, it is Caleb who requires her mercy.

Caleb's own reaction to Grace's surrender echoes the assertion of a feminine concept of power over the masculine, brutal power structures that characterize the Terran Republic. Upon contemplating Grace's offer, Caleb thinks of it in terms of his own salvation, not her capture. "*Grace. Come for me. Save me*" (Kuenzli 268). Instead of renouncing what they mean to each other in order to defeat Caleb and secure victory for the Rebellion, Grace's offer becomes an act of rebellion against the Terran Republic's masculine constructs of power.

At the end of the novel, it is Grace and Caleb's love for each other that allows them to survive an encounter that should have ended in their deaths. Enraged at his father's death, Caleb attacks Grace, who refuses to defend herself. Again, this surrender only reinforces Caleb's feelings for Grace, which defies every convention of merciless vengeance and cold brutality. Stripped to the full realization of their love for each other, Grace and Caleb secure their own survival. Caleb helps Grace's crew get her to safety, at the same time maintaining his assured position as a member of the Republic. Caleb is now uniquely positioned to serve as an agent of the Rebellion from within the highest levels of the Republic's government. Grace and Caleb's love for each other, which should have been the agent of their destruction, has caused them to surrender to a new construction of power, one that defies the cold brutality of the Republic.

The concept of a romantic relationship in defiance of the typical masculine and feminine tropes associated with heterosexual romance was inspired by the romances in Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass* series and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor*. In particular, these works establish a romance as an equal relationship that neither eclipses the identity of either partner nor serves as a catch-all remedy for the conflict. Unlike the *Star Wars* series and in line with the feminist theory outlined in the preceding paragraphs, these romances offer relationships characterized by surrender, support, and acceptance of each partner's power.

In Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass* series, the romance between Aelin Galthynius and Rowan Whitethorn is based upon mutual respect and acceptance. As Aelin's relationship with Rowan Whitethorn grows from a grudging friendship to absolute love and devotion, Maas emphasizes the way that each partner accepts all facets of the other's personhood. Aelin and Rowan fall in love because they help each other accept and heal from the darkness inside them, and as such become more powerful as a unit than they ever would be individually. At the same

time, they do not eliminate their unfavorable qualities, or pretend not to be aware of the depths to which they are capable. Rowan is “a friend who was her match, her equal, and who would never look at her with horror in his eyes” (*Queen of Shadows* 257). The full acceptance of one another’s identity, the awareness that embracing that identity is the only way to heal and grow from it, forms their bond. It creates a romance that rests upon mutual respect and love for exactly who the other person is.

Likewise, Cordelia Naismith and Admiral Aral Vorkosigan’s relationship in *Shards of Honor* develops out of recognition and acceptance. As a scientist and a military commander, Cordelia and Aral are opposites in many ways. Aral is known as the Butcher of Komarr, the perpetrator of a massacre of innocent prisoners. While Cordelia learns that Aral is not actually responsible for these atrocities, their relationship is fraught with the awareness that Aral comes from a planet whose society is built upon brutality and the seizure of power at all costs (Bujold 72).

In the end, Cordelia recognizes that Aral’s world does not always allow for a morally upright outcome, and that he has done what he can to preserve his own sense of morality within the difficult world he inhabits. Aral and Cordelia’s commitment to clutching at what ‘shards of honor’ remain in an imperfect and corrupt universe is what ultimately causes their relationship to flourish. Together, Aral and Cordelia are even more capable of maintaining their commitment to honor. Even so, their eventual marriage is only secondary to the growing political intrigue that they face as a couple on Aral’s home planet Barrayar. As the novel closes, Aral is appointed to the Regency of Barrayar, and Cordelia is fully aware that there will be no such thing as perfect honor and peace in a society built upon corruption and evil. She pushes Aral to accept the

position anyway, knowing that they will both work hard to maintain honor and dignity, and that Barrayar is better off with them both at its head than anyone else.

*The Pirate Queen* imagines Caleb and Grace's love within a similar vein. The emphasis on linking the past with the present throughout the novel reinforces the notion that Grace and Caleb know one another better than anyone else. It is this implicit understanding that prompts each character to make potentially devastating choices regarding the other. Both Grace and Caleb know that they cannot destroy one another. At the same time, their encounter at the novel's end shows two people who accept the changes each had made since their childhood, the destructive path each has had to take in order to secure power. The ambiguity over Caleb's delivery of the blueprints to Admiral Lee indicates that Grace and Caleb's relationship was enough to save their lives, and it can even turn the tide for the galaxy itself.

I came up with *The Pirate Queen* when I looked through the window of my workplace at the parking lot after it had just rained. The sun was breaking through the clouds in individual shafts of light, and they created rainbows that fell into the puddles of the potholes. Each shaft threw itself into golden splendor, all the more captivating because of the darkness that surrounded it. *The Pirate Queen* works that way. Each moment between Grace and Caleb offers a burst of sunlight and color, silhouetted against the shadowy darkness of space. This novel was constructed to feel like love itself, the way that being with another person can make you feel like a gleaming beacon, exploding with color in defiance of the infinite darkness of the universe.

## CHAPTER II

### GRACE

**March 5, 2058**

**Los Angeles, CA**

**Earth**

“As your first mate,” Jones began, “I would like to advise against this—summit.”

“And as your captain,” Caleb replied, “I note your disapproval, and I’m doing it anyway.”

Jones stepped closer to Caleb, her eyes still fixed on the navigational displays.

The bridge bustled with the activity and anticipation that always preceded a mission. Navigations officers scanned the landscape for potential cover or traps, and weapons experts checked and rechecked their plasma cannons, firing off so many warning shots that Caleb suspected the citizens of Los Angeles felt they were watching a light show.

No one was paying attention to the way Jones’ hip was pressed against Caleb’s, the way her lips were swollen from how many times she’d bitten them.

The breathy, soft way she addressed him, so far outside the realm of formality or friendship that no one could pretend not to know what they were to each other. “Come on, Caleb!” Jones whispered. “At least take your phaser with you.”

Caleb kept his eyes forward, refusing to answer the look she shot him. “We agreed. No weapons.”

“She’s a *pirate*—”

“She and I have an...understanding.”

Jones shook her head, a few bangs escaping from her braid. “You have a crush. And it’s gonna get us killed. If your father—”

“He knows what I’m doing. We’ve talked about it.” Caleb looked at her for a moment, then away. He didn’t want to see what she’d been telling him for months.

Didn’t want to see himself disappoint her again, because of this. Because of this pirate queen, who might be—who *was*—

Jones didn’t relent. “You can’t honestly expect me to believe—”

“This is my mission, not yours.” Caleb tried to put the steel back in his voice, tried to treat Jones like she was his first mate, and nothing more.

Not his best friend.

Not his—

Jones sighed. “You’re risking all of us. Your decision affects *all of us*. If you die, that goes on *all of us*.”

Caleb gritted his teeth. “We don’t use lethal force under a truce. We keep our word.”

“Oh, bullshit!” This time, Jones was loud enough that one of the navigations officers looked up from her screen in alarm, glancing between the captain and his first mate like she was watching a tennis match.

“First mate!” Caleb said. “Step. Back.”

Jones’ mouth worked, and Caleb could practically hear the insults and reprimands she wanted to throw his way, the kind she would have delivered without a second thought when they were cadets together.

Lately, everything that happened between Jones and Caleb, everything that mattered, had happened behind closed doors and flat expressions.

Jones tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, and Caleb had to resist the urge to help her brush it back. “You have to trust me,” he said instead, leaning closer so that their audience wouldn’t hear.

Jones’ eyes met his, and he stared her down, willing himself to be the person who had taken the captain’s commission and brought Jones on as his first mate. The person who’d fought at her side all these years.

Caleb was the most promising young captain the Star Navy had ever seen. He only loved the woman who stood before him.

He did not think of brightly colored hair and wicked gray eyes and that knowing smirk. That ache of familiarity. That pulse of anticipation.

“You can’t let her get away this time,” Jones’s breath ghosted across his lips.

“I know.” Caleb whispered.

Caleb’s last meeting with the Commander had ended on a knife’s edge.

*“Do not disappoint me again, Captain.”*

Caleb willed Jones to believe it. “Granuaile will not escape me.”

*I will not let her go, even if she’s—her. Even if it kills me.*

Jones opened her mouth to protest, but Caleb had already stepped back, ending the argument. “Get into position.”

Jones clenched her jaw. “Whatever you say, *Captain*. Don’t forget you wouldn’t be here without me.”

Pirates lined the sidewalk, all of whom had apparently ignored the directive not to bring weapons. They teemed with sharp edges, flails and cutlasses that glowed with plasma energy.

They leaned casually against the wall, looking for all the world like another band of young people waiting to party, if not for the way their eyes followed Caleb as he approached.

He straightened his posture and looked at them squarely. Only a few carried blasters, but they were still the most intimidating group of warriors Caleb had ever seen. Suddenly, a Hidari with deep purple skin and long, white hair, spat at Caleb's feet as he passed. When he turned to look at her, the white hair around her head lashed out, whistling through the air by his face.

Caleb jumped back. Hidarian hair was telepathically controlled, and their warriors could use it to slice someone open with a thought. The girl laughed softly, but she didn't move closer.

Caleb set his jaw and walked on.

Maybe he should go back to his crew. He counted the pirates. The sailors a few blocks away would be more than enough to—

*No.* Caleb shook himself. He wouldn't let Grace's little show of force intimidate him. If he called his sailors in too early, she could escape. He didn't even know if she was inside the bar yet. This could just be another opportunity for her to slip away again.

And if he didn't see her face to face, without the heat of battle or the clamor of their crews surrounding them, he wouldn't know for sure.

He had to know, even if it risked everything.

Only one pirate guarded the bar's entrance, a boy who looked younger than Caleb. He wore a long, hooded robe, and his hands were folded neatly in front of him. He had no visible weapons, and Caleb couldn't understand why she'd send a teenager out to guard the front door.

The boy's cat-like eyes glowed in the setting sun, and he smirked as he scanned Caleb's body. "Captain Lewis," the boy curled his lip. "Unarmed and defenseless."

"I'm never defenseless," Caleb said.



The boy blinked back, unimpressed.

Caleb frowned. Those eyes looked familiar, but he couldn't place the species—

"I'm Daarthurian." The boy said. "Tell your dad I said 'hello.'"

Caleb blinked. "Daarthur? But they were all—"

"Conquered, weren't we? Exterminated? Enslaved?" He arched an eyebrow, and Caleb's knees buckled as a wave of pain blasted through his skull. Black spots danced in front of his eyes. "What—" he hissed, trying to gain some control, but the pain only intensified, like someone was twisting a screw inside his head. Caleb opened his mouth to scream for help--

And the pain stopped.

"That was for my mother." The boy said. "The captain's expecting you."

If Jones was here, he'd already be halfway back to the ship. *She has a Daarthurian? A psionist? We're dead if we go in there.*

At the very least, he should signal for backup. Granuaile was probably as armed as her crew, and Caleb's blaster and cutlass were still sitting on his desk.

Jones would be yelling at him to go back if she was here, threatening to just knock him over the head and carry him back to safety herself.

But Jones wasn't here.

And he had to know.

Caleb walked through the glass door, scanning the dim lighting for traps, the telltale glint of a trip wire or the flash of a motion sensor.

But he only saw her.

Her hair was pulled back in a messy braid, and she looked almost innocuous, standing on the other side of the bar, polishing a glass, with a bottle of some vivid green liquid next to it. Her purple curls escaped from the front and the sides, giving her a frazzled look.

But he'd underestimated her before. He knew she was anything but unprepared. Anything but flustered or nervous.

He could tell by the purpose that colored her every movement. The awareness that coiled her every step.

The hilt of that magnificent sword that protruded from her left hip, and the way she rested her weight on her right leg, ready to leap into action at the slightest provocation.

Granuaile was used to being underestimated. She counted on it.

Caleb walked toward her carefully, setting his feet down only after checking for trip wires or pressure sensors.

She seemed nonchalant, pouring herself a shot of the green liquid and tossing it back. Whatever it was made her eyes glow purple before settling back to their normal grey color.

Caleb stepped toward her until he was right next to one of the stools. She turned to look at him, tilting her head to the side.

She looked...different.

She usually wore an elegantly plumed, classic purple hat, a feather protruding from the top.

Without it, she seemed shorter, less intimidating.

She seemed more familiar without the shadows obscuring the shape of her face.

And Caleb was nearly certain now.

He wondered what she thought of him, now that nothing more than a few feet separated them.

If she remembered...

Caleb fingered the communicator in his pocket. He had her right where he wanted her.

In an all-out fight, no pirates stood a chance against the Navy. The pirates were a well-trained group of thugs, but they were still just a group of thugs. They would be decimated, and he could finally get back into the Admiral's good graces. He could finally end this...

"We've been all over this universe together, haven't we?" Her voice was deep and hoarse, perhaps from the drink. The last few times they'd spoken, he'd been surprised by how high-pitched and soft her voice was. Almost musical.

Now, she sounded more like a pirate queen. Less like a little girl pretending to be something she wasn't.

*What do I sound like?* Caleb wondered. *A captain? Or a boy, playacting?*

His hand hovered over the button as he looked at her across the bar, marveling that she stood so close, after all this time.

*Do I still sound like your best friend?*

He should have arrested her already, but he couldn't. He thought he'd been prepared for this, seeing her up close. Seeing a confirmation of what he'd already expected.

He'd sworn he wouldn't hesitate.

And still, his finger hovered over the comm.

"Have a seat," she said finally, gesturing to a stool in front of her. She started to pour a glass of the green liquid, until he let out a cynical huff of laughter.

She snorted. "Poison? I'm insulted."

“I’ve underestimated you far too many times already. And you didn’t exactly keep to the terms of our agreement.” He gestured to the assembly outside.

“My crew go where they please.” Granuaile raised her chin. “They follow when they choose. They stay when they decide. As for me,” she shrugged. “The sword was a gift. It would be rude not to display it.”

“Your crew sounds inefficient.”

“Sounds like a democracy. That bother you, Captain?”

Caleb inclined his head. “We all have our...agendas.”

“Right.” Granuaile took a swig of the bottle, wincing at the taste again, before handing him the glass. “See? No poison.”

Caleb took a cautious sip, and an electric feeling jolted through him from head to toe. “What is that?” he gasped, his eyes watering.

“Daarthurian Terrawater.” Grace said. “My friend out there makes it.”

“Your friend—” Caleb touched a hand to his head. “Why didn’t you let him kill me?”

“What makes you think I *let* him do anything?”

“I’ve seen him before. He’s loyal to you. The only reason he wouldn’t kill me is if you ordered it. After all, I—”

“--Am one of the people that cost him his planet.” Her eyes met his, and he looked into them for a moment before glancing away.

He didn’t like the accusation there. Didn’t like how he couldn’t answer it.

Caleb swallowed, the burn of the drink lingering in his throat. He sat up straight in his chair, trying not to think about how much he deeply regretted leaving his weapons behind. He took another sip while his other hand reached in his pocket.

When he put down the drink, Granuaile was watching him with narrowed eyes. He cleared his throat, “So do you want me to arrest you in here, or should we do it outside?”

Granuaile let out a bark of laughter. “You think *you* can arrest *me*? Did you forget who called this meeting?”

“You’re a criminal, Granuaile—”

“Captain, thank you.”

“And by order of the Admiral, I—”

“Oh, let’s stop pretending this is about the Admiral or the damned Republic. If it were, I’d already be dead.” Grace sat down on one of the stools, leaning back on the table so that one of the legs came up.

“I have a feeling, Captain,” Caleb couldn’t help but grin at her bravado. “You’d be very hard to kill.”

She leaned forward, the stool coming down with a sharp *tap* as her eyes flicked up and down his body. “Oh, that’s certain.”

Caleb gulped as a different sort of warmth flooded through him. His mouth went dry. “I won’t kill you. But you’ve stolen millions of dollars’ worth of goods.”

Grace smiled with all her teeth. “Undoubtedly.”

“There are even rumors that you’re involved in some kind of rebellion.” Caleb watched her carefully.

“I don’t really pay attention to petty gossip.” She tapped her fingers on the table, walking them until they reached Caleb’s glass.

“I’ve been chasing you all over the galaxy.”

“Badly, I might add.” Grace ran her finger across the rim of the glass.

“Remember Mars 9?”

“How could I not?” Granuaile abandoned her inspection of Caleb’s glass and took a drink out of the bottle again. At the glow in her eyes, the leash Caleb held on himself snapped.

“Almost.” He reached forward, and she flinched, but it was too late. He’d already snatched the hand that had been messing with his glass. Already linked his fingers through hers, like it was nothing. Like he did this sort of thing all the time.

Caleb took a deep breath, waiting for her to pull away. Screaming at himself to have some common sense and knock her out, before she came to her senses. He could feel the calluses on her palm scraping against his own.

But she didn’t pull away.

And he didn’t get out the pair of electromagnetic cuffs in his pocket. He turned over her hand to find a crescent-shaped scar, just below her thumb.

His own thumb ran over it as the reality of the moment hit him, with all the brilliance of a ship blasting into the sky.

“Grace,” he said quietly.

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Caleb’s hand in hers felt like the entire universe had come to an end, then restarted in white rain.

A big bang that pushed everything out, expanding and creating beyond her body, beyond her mind. Beyond the knowable stars.

She wanted to say something to him, anything, show him that she could be more, that she was both more and less than the legendary pirate queen, stealing and torching and looting, her steps through the universe lined with gold and fire and lead.

She was more, and less.

She was a pirate queen, brilliant and terrible, intent upon restoring freedom to the galaxy, and having as much fun as possible along the way.

And she was just a woman, holding the hands of a man. A man she knew she'd have to kill one day, if she cared about anything. About her parents, about the rebellion.

About all the lives she wasn't saving, by letting him live.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered, her eyes meeting his. The most honest thing she'd said in a long time.

Their heads leaned together over the table, bodies falling like two magnets held apart for too long, so close that anyone who walked in would feel the force between them.

So close that there was no way they were just enemies.

He was so close, his blonde eyelashes catching the light.

That dimple in his bottom lip begging to be kissed.

He was too close...

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Caleb closed his eyes, waiting. Waiting for something that, if he was honest, he'd been waiting for his entire life.

But nothing happened.

Grace wrenched her hand out of his.

Caleb's eyes flew open. Grace was standing in front of him, leaning against the back of the bar with that familiar smirk. The hand that he'd been holding now held that flaming purple sword.

"Wha—?"

Caleb's head felt heavy. He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't move.

"The drink—" he tried, but only splutter made it past his lips. "Y-You—"

"Honestly, I can't see how you're surprised." Grace said. "Classic Navy. So narrow-minded. I didn't poison your drink. I poisoned your *glass*."

Caleb tried to leap to his feet again, but his head spun. He fell to one knee, black dancing at the corners of his vision.

A pair of black boots appeared in front of his eyes. He could hear their short, powerful steps all the way to the door.

A BANG resounded against the wood, along with a voice that sounded like Jones, and part of Caleb wanted her to be caught, and part of him hoped she wouldn't, so he might chase her again.

If he caught her, she wouldn't survive more than a day before he handed her over to the Admiral's Hoods. If he caught her, the next time he would see her would be as a cryogenic head, adorning the Admiral's Hall of Achievement.

And if he didn't catch her, it wouldn't be long before the Commander and the Admiral decided that Caleb was more useful as decoration on that same wall.

With a supreme effort, Caleb stood, just as Jones and the other sailors burst through the main entrance. "Stop her!" Jones shouted, pointing across the room, her cutlass stained with blood.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

Caleb turned. In front of the window that overlooked the edge of the bluff, Grace looked back at him, a dark shape silhouetted against the sunrise. "Until next time," she said.

Then she leapt into the sky.



Another crash rang out, and Caleb's mind went silent.

## CHAPTER III

### MARS 9

#### ***Captain's Log: April 8, 2058***

*I cannot be thinking the things I am thinking, dreaming the dreams I am dreaming, unearthing the memories I thought I had long since buried.*

*But there she stood, just across from me, and it was something about her stance. Something about the lilt of her voice as she taunted me---*

*It's been growing for a while, this feeling that she is familiar. It has been growing since that first day, when I chased her through the platform on Mars 9, and something about it felt like I had been waiting for this for a long time. And also like it had already happened*

*My father lied to me, all those years ago. Or he doesn't know.*

*Grace O'Malley is alive.*

*Worse, she is a thorn in the side of Admiral Lee and the entire Terran Republic. She has grown from a local nuisance to a galactic force of nature.*

*If they knew these things—if they knew just who she was...*

*I would be taken from this assignment, without question. I would be transferred, demoted, relegated to the far reaches of the galaxy--*

*I cannot let that happen.*

*After all this time, if she truly is Grace O'Malley...*

*Then I should be the one to bring her in.*

**April 4, 2055**

**Docking Platform A-253**

**Mars 9**

Mars 9 had only recently been deemed habitable. It was a harsh, icy landscape with temperatures that necessitated the most sophisticated cold gear. Thermal suits and stations had to be built to withstand even the most devastating blizzards, and anyone caught outside without the proper equipment would be a block of ice in seconds.

But that wasn't what had discouraged habitation. The Republic was more than equipped to deal with bad weather. The lack of settlement was due entirely to the ruthless snowbeasts that attacked anyone who landed. They eluded the thermal sensors, advancing and retreating into the never-ending blizzard before any of the Navy could mount a defense.

After a few days, there usually wasn't enough of the sailors left to bury.

The planet had been left in obscurity until twenty years ago, when Commander Lewis, then a mere Lieutenant, had stumbled upon a trove of diamonds, embedded just below the planet's surface.

Mars 9's uninhabitable state had no longer been acceptable.

Terra's engineers had worked round the clock for a solution, and they'd found it in the form of the AntiGravity Mines, whose network of aboveground tunnels floated above the planet, while control-operated mining machines braved the extreme conditions of the surface to extract the precious gemstones.

Given the extreme conditions of the diamond extraction as well as the complete safety from the snowbeasts that the height of the station afforded, Caleb couldn't see how the planet

needed a security detail. Anyone who attacked would be forced to either attempt to penetrate the well-fortified stations or take their chances among the snowbeasts and the freezing temperatures.

Perhaps that was why Governor Quentin was thirty minutes late to their meeting, leaving Caleb, Jones, and Hal to pace around the audience chamber of the governor's mansion. Quentin had commissioned an imposing steel fortress, which extended into its own section of the A-253 station.

Apparently, he only bothered to heat the audience chamber to a temperature that wouldn't immediately kill the inhabitants.

Caleb had been hoping to avoid Mars 9. Hoping that his distinguished Academy career, and his father's connections, would save him from the freezing cold and crippling boredom.

"A security detail?" Caleb had asked when his father called him into his office, still covered in confetti from his graduation, glowing with his commission. "I don't understand."

"You will take control of the diamond shipment from Mars 9 and see it through from the docking station back to Earth." The commander's voice was smooth and neutral.

Caleb frowned. "But Commander, I was led to believe that *The Burnsides* would take a role in the Anti-Piracy Initiative."

"And who do you think will attempt to steal the diamond shipments?"

"But Mars 9 has never been attacked when there are so many easier places to steal from! And we'll be completely safe in hyperspace. If you'd let me work on Neptune, or—"

"These diamonds pay the salaries of our officers." Commander Lewis' voice had the sharp edge Caleb recognized from a thousand childhood reprimands. "Do you want me to tell

them that they aren't getting paid this month because the officer in charge of ensuring their shipment feels the task is beneath him?"

Caleb looked down. "No, Commander."

Commander Lewis nodded. "You have to start somewhere, Son." He clapped him on the shoulder. "Get to work."

"I can't feel my fingers," Jones complained. "When is he going to get here?"

"We're just the security detail," Caleb said. "I'm sure the governor has more important things to do."

"Like properly heating this damn place." Jones stuffed her hands into her armpits.

"Just get out your hand warmers and stop whining," Hal said from his position on the floor. The heat generated from his portable communications system seemed to be keeping him comfortable. His fingers raced over the keys, and in a moment, security feeds from the complex were projected on the opposite wall. "Looks like he won't be here for a while," Hal gestured at the screen showing the entrance to the governor's private quarters, where he was apparently engaged in deep and flirtatious conversation with one of his guards.

Jones scoffed as she pulled out her hand warmers, crushing them to activate the chemicals inside.

Caleb privately agreed with Jones. They should just take the shipment without paying this stupid courtesy. Surely his father would not want a delay for a mere formality.

Finally, just as Caleb was contemplating going to the governor's chambers himself, he saw a flash of movement along the corridor leading to their chamber.

Moments later, Corporal Betty burst through the door, panting, her crown of braids knocked askew. “Captain! She’s coming! The pirate queen!” Betty looked terrified.

Jones rolled her eyes. “We have a triple guard around the shipment and the platform. We have lookouts stationed on our ship and satellites scanning the planet. There’s no way she’ll sneak---”

“A ship just removed its cloaking device!” Hal interrupted. “It’s right outside!” He clicked on one of the screens, and it showed an elaborate, three-masted ship, a swarm of colorful figures entwined in the rigging.

“It’s her!” Jones gasped. “Granuaile.”

“Oh, come on.” Caleb said. “A frontal attack? How juvenile.”

“I heard she was our age. Seventeen or eighteen.” Jones said.

“I heard she was immortal.” Hal added.

Caleb shook his head. “Well, she isn’t going to last long if she makes mistakes like this. Hasn’t she ever read a book on battle strategy? If she even *can* read—”

Hal’s screen turned bright red. “Shit, she’s—”

BOOM. Dust fell from the rafters overhead, and all three were knocked to the floor by the force of the impact.

“Did she just—” Caleb started.

BOOM

“I don’t believe it—”. Jones coughed. “She rammed the ship into us.”

“She’s gonna destroy her shields!” Hal said. “She *is* crazy.”

“Get ahold of yourselves,” Caleb said, just as Granuaile rammed into them again.

BOOM.

They fell flat again, but this time Caleb spoke into his communicator. “Attention crew of *The Burnsides*. All personnel to battle stations. Repel the invasion. Use deadly force.”

“Finally.” Jones took out her blaster.

“Is the governor secure?”

“Guards are taking good care of him.” Hal said. “He’ll be here in a couple minutes.”

“Get him in here, seal the doors, and then join us on the platform. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Caleb pulled out his cutlass and checked its weight in his hand. “Jones, Betty, you’re with me. Let’s go.”

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Jethren’s eyes were closed against the screams coming from the docking station, as well as the *ping* of blaster fire and the clash of hand-to-hand combat. The battle below him looked like the waves of the ocean, as sailors and pirates seethed back and forth across the deck of *The Sea Queen*, the black of the sailors’ uniforms contrasting brilliantly with the colorful chaos of the pirates.

“Jethren—” Grace said tentatively.

He held up a hand.

“Jethren, I need to know if they’re bringing the whole crew to attack us or doing an aerial assault.”

He didn’t move.

“*Jethren.*”

The golden cat eyes flew open. “It’s a go.”

“Yes!” Grace turned to the crew. “Okay, you know what to do. Distract and evade. Keep them chasing you, drop paint bombs on their heads, toss them over the edge, but make sure you keep most of them alive. We’re looking for maximum chaos, and I don’t wanna see anyone fleeing the scene in terror until I give the go, okay?”

“Yes, Captain!” came the chorus, apart from Jethren and Dominya, who just glared.

“Why does it have to be you who goes in?” Dominya said.

“Why can’t we kill just some of them? Just for fun?” Jethren added.

Grace answered both of them. “Because I’m the captain, and I have things to do that a bloodbath will get in the way of.”

“What things?”

Grace smirked. “Stealing diamonds, of course.” She took off her jacket to reveal her Navy uniform, down to the buckled boots. “How do I look?”

“Like an arrogant captain whose overconfidence is going to get her caught.” Jethren said.

“So, beautiful.”

Jethren just huffed in response, pulling a blaster from the holster behind his cloak, his bald head gleaming in the lights. *Be careful. I can’t help you much from out here.*

*You worry too much.*

*One of us has to.*

Grace clapped Dominya on the shoulder. “Take care of him.”

Dominya nodded. “It’s an honor as always, Granuaile.”

Grace grinned at the name and strode off to the edge of the ship, then leaped over it, landing gracefully in the escape pod.

*You’re good to go in three, two, one.*



Grace pushed the gravity boost and dropped below the ship, out of range of the docking station's sensors, which were certainly focused on the battle raging above.

\*\*\*

Caleb slashed at his fifth pirate, who simply backed into the rigging of the ship. One of the long metal cables snaked around the pirate, yanking him into the air.

The pirate flew out over the battle, laughing as he launched a glob of paint at one of the sailors, who dropped to the deck, clawing at his eyes.

Caleb stepped back, about to take out his blaster, when a paint bomb exploded on his head. Purple paint ran into his eyes, and Caleb stumbled, swiping his hand across his brow.

The scene around him looked like some bizarre mixture of a brutal battle and a child's birthday party, with the stillness of the frozen air adding even more drama to the scene. Mars' pink sun washed everything in a diffuse glow, and Caleb couldn't tell whether the liquid on the ground was blood or paint.

He also, he realized, couldn't tell where his sailors were.

"To me!" Caleb shouted, raising his cutlass in the air. "To me!"

Something slammed into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

Caleb slashed in retaliation, and the pirate flew backward, clutching a gash in his stomach. "Asshole." The man said through clenched teeth.

Caleb advanced, but a Hidari woman with long white braids dove in front of them, tackling Caleb and rendering him helpless on the deck.

Caleb looked into her purple eyes, certain he was about to die, but she only grinned, pressed a kiss to his forehead, and leapt off, her hair waving behind her.

Caleb dashed back to the docking platform, climbing atop one of the crates for a better vantage point.

It was a mess. Even though his men seemed to be acting without mercy, the pirates dodged and parried, whirled away and came tantalizingly close, occasionally dropping paint bombs from on high. They were drawing his sailors out of their carefully orchestrated battle formations, on the verge of encircling them and leaving them trapped on the deck of the pirate ship.

Caleb waved his cutlass, "Pull back."

The sailors disengaged, lurching back to their original positions, while the pirates danced in front of them, taunting them to come closer.

Jones suddenly appeared beside him, panting, her teeth stained with blood. "What are you doing?"

"Something's not right. Pull back!"

Hal rushed up next, one of his eyes swollen shut and a gash just above it. "Come on, we have them. We can finally be the ones to capture Granuaile!"

"That's what I'm worried about," Caleb said. "Is anyone still on comms?"

"You mean, besides the skeleton crew on the ship? What?" He said, answering the glare Caleb shot him. "It's not like we need strategy help. They rammed a ship into us!"

Caleb was saved from answering by a pirate that crept up behind Hal, narrowly missing a stab from Jones' cutlass. Before any of them could advance, the pirate dashed away.

"Cowards!" Hal said. "Won't anyone stand and fight?"

"Where's the governor?" Caleb asked.

"In the control room," Jones said.

Caleb felt a churning in his gut. Something was wrong. “Where is Granuaile? You can’t honestly tell me the pirate queen doesn’t fight with her crew.”

Jones scanned the horizon. “You’re right. Governor Quentin!” She barked into the communicator. “What’s your status?”

“We’re being attacked.” Quentin’s voice, shrill and terrified, came over the speaker. “We’re being—” there was a burst of static, and then Quentin’s panicked voice came over the comm again. “Are you listening to me?” Quentin’s voice came over the comm again. “She’s here and she’s got a purple sword—”

“Shit!” Caleb swore. “Hal, with me. Jones, keep them back!” Jones growled in exasperation, pulling out her blaster and firing at the nearest pirate, who fell to the ground. Before Jones could move forward, one of the pirate’s comrades pulled their comrade back below the ship’s deck.

Jones stepped forward with a roar. “For Lee! For the Republic!”

“FOR LEE! FOR THE REPUBLIC!” The troops echoed, charging forward.

The pirates, who had been laughing at the sailor’s antics, quickly leapt into the rigging of their ship, clambering over it towards the docking station.

“Don’t follow them!” Jones yelled. “Stand your ground.”

In the ensuing chaos, not one pirate noticed Hal and Caleb slip out of the fray, back into the tunnels toward the communications room.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Hal was muttering, but Caleb kept silent.

Granuaile would not stop his rise before he’d even started. This was a side mission, a place for him to prove he could be trusted with a command. A stepping stone to regional commander, to taking his father’s place. Granuaile would not get in the way--

Caleb and Hal arrived at the sealed entrance to the receiving chamber, where Caleb keyed in his credentials. He pressed the Enter button, and he and Hal rushed into the room.

Governor Quentin had a pink, stuffed dragon in his mouth, and duct tape lashed him to the office chair.

“WHERE.” Caleb demanded.

Quentin jerked his head, a moan of fear escaping his mouth, and Caleb whirled to see a black-clad figure racing down one of the side hallways. She had a backpack slung over her shoulder.

Caleb and Hal gave chase. At the noise, the girl glanced behind her for a moment, and Caleb got a flash of dark skin and light-colored eyes before she took off again, racing for the pink sky that beckoned.

\*\*\*

Caleb had no idea. She could see it in his face. It had been so long since they had last seen each other. Her hair had been dark then, not this purplish hue. And her mother had kept it short.

She thought she saw Caleb stutter a step, but that could have been anything.

He looked different, too. She knew that she was wasting time, the backpack full of diamonds weighing her down, stopping to look at him every few feet, but he made her so curious.

And he still wasn't very fast.

His messy blonde hair, which he'd always kept long, was cropped brutally short. Those blue-green eyes narrowed in rage, or was it recognition? Confusion? His jaw was square; he was lean, muscular. Every bit the Navy's rising star.

She wondered if he still had the same scar on his chin.

She wondered if she looked anything like the girl that had left Lawrence, Kansas, all those years ago. If he remembered any of it.

Grace saluted him for just a second, like a proper sailor.

The man next to him looked even angrier, redoubling his speed, but Caleb's expression changed into something more. Something—different.

But Grace had wasted enough time already.

She ran, her boots stomping along the thin carpet.

Caleb would never catch her.

She raced down the hallway, always keeping a little bit of distance between them. Just enough to make him feel like he was getting close. Just enough to make it *fun*.

The hallway ended in a dead-end, a place for ships to dock. Grace stood, silhouetted in the pink light of the setting sun, and turned to them.

Then she fell backward, her arms wide.

She heard a “NO!” and laughed, as her ship zoomed up to catch her fall.

“Until next time!” she called, waving at the two of them, laughing at their shocked expressions.

And even though she was far away, she felt like she could see an answering grimace on the captain's face. He dipped his head. An acknowledgment.

A game that had just begun.

*Until next time, Granuaile.*

Grace didn't waste any time. She punched in the Mach 3 drive in her pod and let the glass bubble close over her, shooting off around the Southern edge of the planet. Hopefully, her coordinates were correct. She knew they had to move every so often in order to throw off suspicion....

Grace was flying over the white, crystalline surface of the planet when her communicator beeped.

"Granuaile?"

"What's up, Asher?"

"You need to land in the middle of the lake. We'll relieve you of your cargo there."

"Asher, I can't land this thing in the ice. It'll totally fuck up my cannons."

"You can fix them when you get back to your ship."

Grace sighed.

Asher's voice went lower. "Sorry, but it's protocol."

"You won't have to sink me. I'm on your side."

"You *are* a pirate."

Grace shook her head. She carefully maneuvered the joystick so that her ship descended gracefully, in ever-tightening circles. Most pilots preferred to just type in the coordinates and have the ship make the landing, but Grace was old school. Paladin had taught her to never rely on machines for something she could do on her own. Besides, the fact that she had to almost entirely rely on her proximity sensors and her mental map of the area made this the most challenging flying she'd done in a while.

Grace changed the settings on the thrusters and lowered herself into the center of the lake. "I do accept tips," she said as she landed. "I've mentioned that, right?"

A knock sounded on the outside of her pod, and she opened the sunroof to a blast of cold air, a gleam of sunlight, and Asher, furry head and all, peering in at her.

“The bag’s in the passenger seat. All six million, completely accounted for and stolen back from Navy. Justice is restored.” She held up her hand. “High-five?” She glanced at Asher’s clawed hands. “High-four?”

Asher huffed, leaning over her and taking the bag, his ears flat to his head to show his annoyance. His fur brushed against her face. “Ugh.” Grace spat.

“We appreciate your assistance,” Asher said.

“How’s the wife? The kids?”

“If you would be on your way...” Asher began, but the corner of his mouth twitched, a telltale sign that he was on the verge of giving her one of his kind’s huge, fang-tipped smiles.

“Come on! I haven’t seen you guys in months. You’re not gonna invite me in?”

“I have to take these to command.”

“Right, right.” Grace let her shoulders slump. “You don’t wanna see me. I get it.”

Asher’s face wrinkled. “I’ll call you tomorrow to let you know of our movements, and when you can expect your payment.”

“Thank you for helping me, Granuaile. You are the cleverest, most badass Pirate Queen in the history of time, and your work is instrumental to the rebellion. Also, I would love to try your Earth ‘pizza’ some time.”

Asher sighed, turning from the doorway. “I miss Paladin. He wasn’t nearly as chatty.” Asher climbed off the ship, not even bothering to wave goodbye before he disappeared.

“That was just mean.” Grace said. “I don’t even feel bad now.”

She put the ship in gear and rose, but not before the lake beneath her exploded.

The blast propelled her upward, as shards of ice bounced harmlessly across her already raised shields.

“Granuaile. Why am I missing 2 million?”

Grace laughed.

“Come back here right now! I’m going to—”

Grace switched the comms off, then engaged the hyperspace drive. She had a ship to catch, and crew members to reward.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE FLOOD

#### ***Captain's Log April 8, 2055***

*Here follows the first entry of Captain Caleb Lewis, captain of the Burnsidies, on this date 8<sup>th</sup> of April, Year of Lee 2055, currently somewhere between Mars 9 and the Greenbelt System.*

*I suppose I should explain my failure. Recount the details of mistake, to ensure that it does not happen again. That is what a good captain would do.*

*But there is something else.*

*I have known a great deal of grief in my life. Known what it is to stand at a parent's grave, to watch a friend die alone and in disgrace.*

*I have known what it is to feel pain, and perhaps that is why she caught my attention so easily.*

*Someone so seemingly free of any kind of pain, any care at all, beyond the next profit.*

*Looking at me like she has known me all this time.*

*This Granuaile, this pirate queen. This woman who managed to outsmart my crew without leaving a single body behind, with parlor tricks and paint and speed.*

*She makes me think of someone else I used to know. Someone just as willing to rush headlong into danger. Someone obsessed with sparkly objects and hidden places, who seemed to consider reprimands and rule-breaking nothing but minor inconveniences...*

*Granuaile brings her to the front of my mind like she hasn't been in a long while.*

**May 1, 2051**

**Lawrence, Kansas**

**Earth**

“I really don’t think we should be down here,” Caleb said. “If either of our parents found out—”

“Stop being such a wuss.” Grace barely looked behind her to see if he was following, examining one of the branches of the tunnel. “I think this one just dead-ends. Do you want go down it anyway?”

“Your parents will be furious.”

“They’re busy.” She waved her hand. “Fighting crime. Killing bad guys. Whatever.”

“It’s supposed to flood today. “What if it floods down here?”

“It hasn’t flooded here in 20 years,” Grace rolled her eyes. “We’ll get like, two inches of rain.”

“It was raining pretty hard when we came in. I don’t think—”

“Would you stop worrying?”

“One of us has to.”

“You didn’t have to come.”

“Yes, I did.” Caleb said, even though he was thinking the same thing. He could have said he had homework. Could have said his mother needed his help with an experiment.

He could have just said that going into the storm drain beneath their neighborhood, when their parents had specifically told them not to, was not his idea of a fun Saturday afternoon.

But Grace had thrown open the door to his house and declared their adventure, and Caleb had followed.

Really, there had been no question. Just as there never had. Grace asked him to come, and he came. Grace went, and he followed. Sure, he'd spend a few minutes complaining. Arguing against whatever endeavor she'd planned—taking a shuttle to the nearest theme park, sneaking onto a flight bound for the coast.

Caleb felt that he had to protest for the principle, if nothing else.

But Grace knew that he always had her back. It was why she never watched her back, why she always dashed headlong into whatever scheme she'd planned out.

Caleb would follow her down a thousand dark tunnels.

He'd follow her anywhere.

"It's getting late." Caleb said, hurrying to keep up with her pace. "They're gonna kill us."

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Grace tuned out Caleb's protests and pulled out her phone, checking their location. Above her, she heard a roaring sound as the rain intensified. She shivered involuntarily. They would get soaked when they resurfaced. She swiped across the flash flood warning on her phone as she checked the GPS.

"We should be right underneath the town square—wait—" She held onto the wall as the whole tunnel trembled. Dust fell from the ceiling.

"Nice," Grace said, trying to conceal the pang of fear that shot through her. If Caleb knew she was afraid, they'd turn around.

Grace was always afraid, but her fear was a compass. Pointing toward her next adventure, her latest scheme. She did things *because* they scared her.

She went into these tunnels because they were dark and echoey, and they felt like they would collapse on her at any second.

Grace didn't think she could control her fear without Caleb. Something about him calmed her, like sitting next to a roaring fireplace. Reining her in just enough to take the edge off her recklessness. A rock in the midst of a rushing current, that she could always hold onto.

Even though Caleb was always the most afraid, he made her feel safe.

"Look, it's getting late, and the flood—" Caleb stopped, peering down the passageway she'd indicated. "Wait—what is that? It looks like writing."

Grace started forward before Caleb could protest, her phone lighting the path in front of her. She could hear Caleb's footsteps behind her, still dragging to communicate his reluctance.

When she finally got close enough to read what had been written on the wall, she started to think that Caleb might have been right.

"'Run'?" Caleb said. "Who would just put 'run'?" His voice went up at the end.

Grace shook her head. "Maybe we *shouldn't* be down here."

Suddenly, the roaring intensified. It sounded as though they were under attack.

"What is that?" Caleb shined his phone's light over the walls and ceiling.

"Probably just the rain picking up," Grace muttered, still inspecting the writing. She pulled out a marker from her pocket.

"I'm going to see what that is," Caleb said, as Grace started to draw her name. "And that's vandalism."

Grace didn't even bother to answer.

Caleb's footsteps stopped. "Grace," he said slowly. "We need to go *right now*."

"Just a minute," Grace said, working on shading beneath her name. "I need to do a border—"

Suddenly, she felt Caleb yank her by the arm, tugging her toward the intersection of the two tunnels.

"What—" she said, finally wrenching her arm away as they arrived at the intersection. "The Hell—"

She stopped, stunned. And without thinking, without even noticing, her hand grasped Caleb's as she took off in the opposite direction.

Away from the enormous wall of water that rushed toward them.

\*\*\*

Caleb ran alongside Grace, nearly slipping on whatever had been dumped there with them, his hand still clasped in hers as they dashed back down the alleyway.

Caleb didn't think he would have been able to move if Grace hadn't yanked on his hand, pulling him from shock into action.

Grace was panting, more terrified than he'd ever seen her, her hair a frizzy halo around her. They reached another spot where the tunnels branched, but neither of them slowed, running on down the main tunnel, hoping it opened into the river.

Caleb's heart leaped as he saw a shaft of light ahead, but he could feel how close the water was, and he redoubled his grip on Grace's hand.

She looked at him, her eyes blown wide with panic. "Don't let go!" she shouted, as the wall of water descended, sweeping them with it.

\*\*\*

Grace held tight to Caleb's hand as the water overtook them, rushing them along the tunnel toward the shaft of light.

She prayed that it was a real opening and not a simple window as they tumbled closer, the flood deep enough that she couldn't touch the bottom of the tunnel.

Caleb's hand was still tightly grasping hers, his face set. Branches and debris went with them, and Grace wrenched Caleb out of the way as a tree limb narrowly missed his head.

The light was closer now, and Grace's heart leaped.

It was only when they were on the lip of the waterfall that Grace realized that the tunnel ended with a thirty-foot drop to the river below.

Her hand was wrenched out of Caleb's as they flew out of the tunnel into open space.

Grace felt a jolt of pain as her legs broke the river's surface.

And then she felt nothing at all.

\*\*\*

Caleb saw Grace fall, smashing her leg on a rock that jutted out from the bottom of the river before plunging into the freezing water.

Then he hit the bottom, pain rippling through his limbs as he broke the surface. He plunged deeper, moving out of the path of the waterfall until he surfaced.

It was so dark that he could barely see anything, but he still swam desperately, hoping to at least run into her in the dark.

But Caleb couldn't fight the current, and he was swept onto a bank that jutted out in the middle of the river. His feet found purchase on the rocks, and he stood, but he still couldn't see anything.

"Grace!" He called desperately. "Grace! Where are you!"

But there was nothing but the black water, and the roaring of the river.

He stepped back on the bank to get a better view, and that's when he bumped up against something soft.

Caleb nearly fell, catching himself just in time to notice curls, soaked with water.

"Grace!" He turned the body over, shuddering at his glimpse of her leg, which was twisted at a sickening angle, a shaft of bone sticking out. "Grace! Can you hear me?"

Grace's eyes fluttered, and she let out a gasp before going unconscious again.

Caleb put his head against her face, listening to her breathing. It was shallow, desperate.

He groped in his pockets, but his phone must have been lost in the flood.

"Need to keep you—warm—" he muttered, taking off his coat and laying his body across hers, shivers wracking through him. "Warm until—someone—c-c-comes—"

Caleb stayed like that, shivering atop her, for he knew not how long. He just kept listening to the shallow breaths she drew, assuring himself that she was alive.

Dimly, Caleb became aware of a white light surrounding him. He raised his head—

"That's—Tim, take a look at this," a voice said. "That's the Lewis kid!"

"Jesus. Who is that he's with?"

Caleb tried to sit up. Two figures in blue uniforms were rushing toward him with a red bag. "Grace—" he said, then darkness overtook him.

\*\*\*

"So. Not my best idea," Grace said when she arrived in the treehouse, laying down next to Caleb as he looked at the stars through the opening in the ceiling.

She'd been in the hospital for three days while the doctors had repaired her leg. She was supposed to still be resting it, but she'd texted Caleb to meet her in the treehouse anyway.

“How long are you grounded for?” Caleb asked.

“‘Til I’m 18. What about you?”

“Until I go to the Academy.” Caleb said. Grace nodded against him. Caleb took comfort in the calm, even sound of her breathing. Not shallow and stuttering, like it had been that night.

Caleb shivered at the memory. He’d thought she was going to die. He’d thought they both were, but Grace’s death had scared him more.

The idea of not having Grace next to him, teasing him, egging him on. Arguing about Naval battle strategy and pulling him into her adventures.

The idea of not being able to come out here and listen to her breathe against him as she talked, or just slept underneath the stars...

Caleb couldn’t imagine life without her.

She was silent for so long that Caleb thought she must have fallen asleep. Finally, she spoke.

“I’m sorry.” Grace said. “You could have been killed—this is all my fault.”

She burrowed her head into his chest, and her breathing quickened. Caleb felt his shirt go damp.

“I don’t ever want to lose you,” Caleb said quietly. “I don’t think—I don’t think I can.”

Grace got up to look at him, and she had a different expression on her face than he’d ever seen before. She looked intense, and older.

And before Caleb could do anything but lay there stupidly, Grace had leaned in and kissed him, sloppily, some of her tears falling on his face.

Caleb did his best to kiss her back, not sure how this was done, not wanting to mess it up, but before he could form any kind of response, she pulled back. “Thank you,” she whispered.



And Caleb was still laying there, frozen, as Grace climbed back down the ladder.

He got up just in time to see her dash across her backyard and through her door, shutting it carefully behind her.

Caleb touched his lips, which still tingled. “Grace,” he whispered.

CHAPTER V  
PLUTROPOLIS

***Captain's Log November 20, 2058***

*"I am a sailor of the Star Navy, a champion of the Terran Republic.*

*My mission is to keep peace throughout the galaxy, to promote understanding between all peoples and species, and to respect the dignity of every living being.*

*I vow to act always in the interest of the Terran Republic and her ideals of liberty and equality. I vow also to respect and defend Admiral Lee and the Republic at the cost of even my own life."*

*The oath we all swore at graduation haunts my thoughts, chasing me out of sleep and into nightly wanderings of the corridors.*

*I feel like a ghost, floating untethered, grasping desperately at something solid, something I am able to understand.*

*I have always known the Republic to be flawed. I have always known Lee to be more of a dictator than a herald of democracy.*

*I have known this, and still I expected decency. I expected truth. I expected a Republic that had only a few branches in need of trimming.*

*Not a diseased fruit, rotting from the inside out.*

*I cannot get the bitter taste out of my mouth, even though I know that I must. Even though my father has been calling since we left Plutropolis, threatening, demanding an explanation.*

*"You need to start thinking about an exit strategy," he warned in the last transmission.*

*"A way to excuse this failure, without the inevitable cost."*

*As always, my father is concerned with my ambition, my future in the Star Navy.*

*I used to be, too. Before these last few days, all I wanted was a seat in that high-backed chair. All I wanted was an entire army at my command.*

*But now?*

*With the glares of reproach even my crew cast me, with the triumph I felt in my heart when Grace did what I could not...*

*I don't know what to hold on to.*

*If I am not Captain Caleb Lewis, loyal servant of Admiral Lee, defender of the Republic, then who am I?*

**November 18, 2058**

**Plutropolis, Pluto**

The sprawling city conglomerate of Plutropolis was bright and vibrant enough to be seen from orbit—a mass of white lights that looked like stars across the planet’s deep blue surface. As the leading planet in technological advancement, Pluto’s population was intent upon showcasing its massive talent, illustrating its power and innovation from the moment ships arrived within sight of the surface. The communication devices, the space suits, and even the propulsion systems for space fighters came from this city, manufactured in one of its brightly lit factories.

Plutonians were light-years ahead of the rest of the galaxy in terms of advancement, and as a result they guarded their secrets jealously. Only a Plutonian could design or build any of the hyperspace drives or propulsion systems that were so essential for transportation across the galaxy. Once Pluto had been inaugurated into the Terran Republic, Lee had negotiated a trade agreement that ensured Republic ships had the monopoly on Plutonian trade, ushering in a new era of trade and innovation across the galaxy.

It was perhaps no coincidence that Granuaile had chosen Pluto as one of her prime targets for piracy, Caleb thought, watching as the ship descended. Plutropolis had the most sophisticated security system he’d ever seen, with satellites constantly scanning the skies and analysts deciphering every word of communication. Squadrons of the Republic’s swiftest vessels patrolled constantly, ensuring that no area of the planet remained unguarded.

And still, Granuaile had managed to make off with precious cargo at least three times.

Caleb squared his shoulders as the ship landed and doors opened, the landing ramp stretching out to the feet of the waiting dignitaries.

She would not escape this time.

Because of the planet's distance from the Sun, it was nearly always a deep night, so the whole runaway was washed in a mixture of light and shadow. The bright white beams of the ship, the outlines of the buildings, all glowed like the stars he'd had embedded in his ceiling as a child. It was darkly beautiful, an enchanting, glowing landscape.

Before Caleb could take a second to marvel, Ambassador Antwon Cloakial, the trade representative from the planet, strode up the ramp to greet Caleb, his deep purple robes a dark puddle behind him. When he got closer, Caleb noticed his blue skin was marked with purple tattoos, set in jagged, ridged lines across his cheeks.

Caleb's polite greeting was immediately drowned out by a litany of complaints.

"Late, as usual. Just like your father. Does the Admiral mean to insult me?"

Caleb stood up straighter and deepened his voice. "Sir, I am here to assist your security for the course of the event."

Cloakial's red eyes widened. "The *event*? Do you know what today is?"

Caleb took a deep breath, feeling Hal and Jones tense beside him. "No, sir."

Cloakial rolled his eyes. "Of course you don't. You sailors are all the same—no interest anything that isn't shooting at you. Come." He swept toward the palace, which was as blue as he was, embossed with glowing gold around the doorways. As he walked, two guards clad in the black and red uniform of the Plutonian Police bowed. Caleb noted the standard plasma blasters at their hips, along with what looked like whips coiled next to them.

*Whips?* Caleb thought. *What would they need whips for?*

"Stay with the ship Hal," Caleb ordered, as he and Jones hurried to catch up with the ambassador.

For once, Hal didn't argue, stepping back to the ship without a sound.

“Ambassador,” Caleb called, “If my tech could have access to your communications software, we could coordinate our security—”

Cloakial waved a hand, and one of the guards took off toward the ship.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Call me Ambassador. It is my official title.”

“Of course, Ambassador. Sorry, Ambassador.” Plutonians moved faster than humans, it seemed. Caleb and Jones were both panting at the frantic pace, nearly jogging, but Cloakial seemed as placid as if he were going for a pleasant stroll.

A servant opened the double doors that led into the entrance hall. She wore bright pink robes, billowy and unwieldy-looking, and at first Caleb didn’t notice her mutilation.

But then he looked closer, and he saw the pink stump, the grotesque, twisted flesh where one of her hands had been.

It must be incredibly painful even now, with the flesh so twisted like that.

“Thank you,” Caleb tried to focus on her face, but she kept averting her eyes. Caleb halted. “Ma’am...? Are you alright?”

The girl looked up at Caleb, her eyes wide. She shook her head, her lips forming a word—

With a snap, Cloakial cracked the servant across the face. She fell to the ground, whimpering, a spot of bright orange blood leaking from her cheek.

“My servants are not accustomed to being spoken to,” Cloakial said. “You should move on and let her get back to work.”

“What the Hell was that for?” Caleb demanded, while Jones practically vibrated with fury next to him.

The ambassador frowned. “My servants must be no more receptive to compliments than furniture.”

Caleb and Jones exchanged shocked glances, but they didn’t dare say anything.

The Plutonians were responsible for the Heliotrope Hyperspace Engine, the key to navigating the galaxy quickly and efficiently, without the fuel burnup of regular hyperspeed. They’d also engineered Personal Propulsion Suits, which enabled individual sailors to navigate space, should their craft fail unexpectedly.

“Without their support,” Commander Lewis had told Caleb, his voice low and serious. “We lose the Republic. Do not embarrass me.”

“Why would I embarrass you?” Caleb had asked. “I got full marks in Diplomatic Relations.”

The Commander shook his head. “You still have so much to learn.”

“Captain! Are you listening to me?”

“Hmmm?” Caleb refocused on Cloakial’s face, pretending to ignore Jones’ look of burning incredulity. “You were talking about—“ he racked his brain—“Bartering Day?”

“Bidding Day!” Cloakial snapped, as Jones winced.

“Apologies, Ambassador.” Caleb bowed, and Cloakial pursed his lips, but went on: “Bidding Day will be held in two days, in the grand ballroom. I hope that gives you all time enough to prepare. We have been distinctively...singled out in the last few years.”

“Granuaile.” Jones nodded before Caleb could interject. “We’re well aware she frequents this place.”

“Every year, like clockwork.” The ambassador said gruffly. “Thought you’d know that, seeing as you’re supposed to be the ones to bring the Admiral her head.”

“We’re focused more on a capture.” Caleb said.

Jones rolled her eyes, and the Ambassador shook his head. “You listen to me, kid. Pirate like that, with a crew like that—only way you’re ever gonna get rid of her is if you put her head on a stick in the Hall of Achievement.”

Caleb’s stomach lurched. “Yes, Ambassador.”

The ambassador smiled, his eyes glinting dangerously. “I have special plans for that one. Do me a favor and bring her to me. When I am done with her, she will wish she was dead. Then you can grant her wish.”

Caleb gulped. “Yes, Ambassador.”

\*\*\*

“Captain Lewis is here?” Grace grabbed Jethren by the shoulders. “Are you sure?”

“No, my telepathy is malfunctioning. Why? Do you want his autograph?”

“Shut up. Why would the Commander send a captain to a trading outpost in the most peaceful part of the galaxy?”

“Apparently, our raiding of Cloakial’s cache has become a bit of a tradition.”

Grace stood and paced around her office, staring at a map of the galaxy on the wall.

“So do we leave? They obviously know an attack is coming.” Dominya walked up to the map, placing her hands over their location, anchored within Plutropolis’ gravitational field. “We can pull out of here and be halfway to Greenbelt by the time he realizes he missed us.”

Grace pressed her hands to her forehead. “We can’t leave. We can’t leave all those people—”



Dominya shrugged. “It’s us or them.”

Grace glared at her. “I don’t ever want to hear you say that again. Salt—” she called over to the man sitting with his feet up on her desk, his eyes closed, “What do we have?”

Her spymaster put his feet down, stretched, and ran a hand through his blonde hair. “Couple busboys think they can drop dishes and cause a minor distraction, but they’ll be beaten for it. Badly.” He made a cutting motion with his hand, then a *snick* noise.

“Tell them to stand down.”

“Are we still going to get them out?” Salt asked. “I made some promises to a certain pretty servant—”

“How can we?” Dominya interrupted. “They know we’re coming. And after L.A.—”

“You never did tell us exactly what happened,” Salt spoke over her, his golden eye gleaming as he focused on his captain. “How *did* you get him to drink that?”

Grace shrugged. “My feminine charm.”

“Impossible,” said Dominya. “You don’t have any.”

Grace met her eyes. “Don’t I?” The Hidari woman looked away, her cheeks flushed a deep blue.

“I need to think.” Grace said. “For now, hold up on all plans, but keep your ears open.”

“Are we moving forward?” Salt asked, tapping his fingers on her desk. “I need to make plans.”

Grace grinned. “Of course we are. I’ve never run from a fight, and I’m not about to start now—”

“We’re *pirates!*” Dominya burst out. “We run from fights all the time!”

Jethren put his hand on the table. “Enough. The captain says we’re doing it, and we’re doing it.”

“Everybody out except Jethren,” Grace said. “And send in Clocks.”

“No.” Dominya’s hair started to stand up, the way it always did when she got upset. “No, you promised we wouldn’t.”

“Send in Clocks.” Grace said again.

“Please—Grace.” Dominya moved closer, so that only Grace could hear. “You swore.”

Grace’s eyes flicked to Dominya’s, then away. “Leave, Dominya. That’s an order.”

Dominya’s lip curled, her hair standing straight up. “Yes, Captain.” She pushed past everyone to the door, where Grace could hear her shouting about going to her workshop, and not wanting to be disturbed.

“I’ll get Clocks,” Salt said, raising an eyebrow at Dominya’s dramatic exit. “Captain.”

After Salt left, Jethren sighed and walked over to Grace’s desk, sitting in the ornate chair behind it and glaring at her.

“Stop it.” Grace said.

*You know, one day Dom’s gonna kill you for breaking her heart.*

*Well. I’d deserve it.* Grace pulled a knife from its position in the map on the wall, threw it in the air, and caught it.

*You swore we wouldn’t blow anyone up.*

*I know what I said. That’s why I need Clocks.*

*You think there’s gonna be no collateral damage if a bomb goes off?*

Grace tipped her head to the side. *How’s Dominya’s Scrambler working?*

Jethren frowned. *It's like being on the worst ship in existence, plus your insides are being scraped out, why?*

"Wait!" Jethren said aloud, just as Clocks stumbled in, fuses falling from his pockets, his bright orange hair in disarray. "That might—that just might work."

"It will definitely work" *and maybe Caleb will finally see what I've been trying to tell him all these years. Maybe he'll--*

Jethren wrinkled his nose, looking like a cat who had gone off his dinner. *Don't get your hopes up.*

"Clocks." Grace said, moving back to her desk and nudging Jethren out of her seat with her toe. "How's it going?" she sat in her chair and leaned back, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

Clocks sighed, directing his gaze at the ceiling. "I figured out a compound that will go off according to a remote time release, but you won't let me *use* it, so—"

"I need you to help me blow up a palace." Grace spoke over him.

Clocks stopped talking and looked at Grace. He put his hand to his heart, a piece of fuse wire falling out of his pocket and onto the floor as he did so. "Finally."

\*\*\*

Caleb thought he might be sick. Jones, next to him, had turned pale beneath her dark skin.

A group of around a hundred Plutonians, all in the same pink robes as the servant, were huddled on the floor of the ballroom, clutching one another, weeping and bleeding orange blood onto the carpet. As Caleb watched, one of them got up and sprinted at one of Cloakial's guards. There was a scream, a flash of red, and the Plutonian fell to the ground, dead.

Another Plutonian rushed forward to the body, tears leaking from his eyes. He flung himself over the body, sobbing uncontrollably, nearly screaming with pain and sorrow.

The guard released another blast into the air, then fired at the Plutonian, leaving a scorch mark where the Plutonian's hand had been a moment before. He got up, stumbling back into the crowd, shaking so hard he could barely stay on his feet.

Jones took a deep breath. "They're slaves. This is a—slave auction."

"I—"

Jones whirled on him. "Did you know about this?"

Caleb shook his head, but he thought back to the rumors around the some of the bars, where people could talk without being overheard. That the Republic wasn't as democratic as it seemed. That Admiral Lee didn't care what kind of society you had, as long as you paid the bills on time.

He thought it had all been nothing but rumors, drunk old sailors missing the glory days and embellishing to make themselves feel better about being out of the game.

Why hadn't his father mentioned this? Why hadn't he told him, warned him?

*"You still have so much to learn."*

"Captain Lewis," Cloakial said, stepping up to Caleb's left, causing both him and Jones to jump. Neither of them had noticed him approach, so engrossed were they in the scene.

"Ambassador. I didn't know Bidding Day was so...literal."

"It is one of our planet's most time-honored traditions." Cloakial swept a hand at the scene. "The servants are happy to be chosen for my household, happy to serve."

"They—volunteer?"

“In a fashion. If they had been content to live under my rule and pay their taxes, this wouldn’t have happened. But between you and me—” he lowered his voice. “We always need more labor, and the servants do it so cheaply. It’s why I can get your Navy’s glorious Heliotrope Engine systems up and running so easily.”

Caleb thought of the servant girl bleeding in the hallway and had to suppress a snarl of rage.

Jones, on the other hand, simply blurted. “This is *slavery*.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. They’re *servants*. They have a place to live, and food to eat, as much as they want. I even care for them if they are sick.”

“But the Republic outlaws—”

Cloakial laughed. “This is the natural order of things. The servants are well content in their roles. They are paid with food and lodging, much better than they’d be on the streets of the city.”

“They don’t look better off to me.”

“There is always some grief at the first Bidding Day. Change is hard for everyone.”

“Does my—does Commander Lewis know about this?” Caleb asked, over what was probably a thoroughly inappropriate retort on the part of Jones. He subtly kicked her in the leg.

“Of course. He and Admiral Lee were part of the treaty that made sure our economic system was kept in place when we joined the Republic.”

Caleb nodded. “Thank you, Ambassador, for showing us this—aspect of your economy. If you’ll excuse us, Jones and I must verify the security around the ballroom.”

“Of course, of course.” The ambassador waved again, and Caleb and Jones walked to the door, trying not to appear rushed.

“Captain!” Cloakial called just as they were nearing the door.

Caleb stopped, turning slowly, trying to compose his features into polite interest, rather than disgust. “Ambassador?”

“I can have one sent home with you, if you like. Help your parents with the housework.”

“No thank you, sir.” Caleb said tightly. “I believe my father would not want one in our household.”

He turned to the door before the ambassador could say anything else, ignoring the burning of the ambassador’s gaze into his back.

Once they were in the hallway, Caleb and Jones slumped against the wall, looking at each other.

“That was...” Jones said.

Caleb wiped a hand across his brow. “I know.”

“I’m gonna kill him.” Jones said tightly. “I’m gonna kill them all. I didn’t sign up for this.”

“We have orders.”

“Orders?” Jones hissed. “Screw *orders*! They’re keeping *slaves* in there!”

“I know.”

“We should burn this whole place to the ground,” Jones’ voice rose, and Caleb shushed her.

“You sound like a pirate!” Caleb hissed. “You wanna light stuff on fire instead of making any real difference, Granuaile should be here any day now. But my father gave me this mission specifically, and after what happened in L.A., we cannot mess this up.”

“Your father helped this man keep his slaves. He is a disgusting—”

Caleb slapped his hand over her mouth, leaning in. “Enough. Jones, please. No one is more upset about this than me.”

She ripped his hand from her mouth and slapped him across the face. The crack echoed in the hallway, and Caleb heard the rustle of what must be approaching guards. “Go find Hal,” he said quickly, ignoring the stinging sensation. “Help him with coordinating security.”

Jones stepped closer to him, until they were almost nose to nose. “Don’t. Ever. Touch me like that. Again.” She said.

Then she was gone, leaving Caleb to face a cadre of guards. “Just sent her to look at the satellites again, make sure they haven’t been jammed.”

“What happened to your face?” one of the guards asked.

“Oh, I did this. I was falling asleep in there.” Caleb fake-yawned. “I mean, get to the Bidding already, am I right?”

The guard looked at him quizzically. “Ambassador Cloakial sent us to check that your crew are in position.”

“They are stationed all throughout the complex. If Granuaile shows up, we’ll take her.” Caleb’s heart sank at the thought.

“Will you return to your seat then, Captain?”

“Give me a minute to walk around. I want to double-check a few things.”

“Suit yourself.”

Caleb waved as the guards turned and retreated down the corridor. Once they had disappeared from sight, he sunk to the floor.

*What am I going to do?*

*How could Dad be okay with this? How can I?*

He remembered the oath he'd sworn at graduation, the one that every sailor uttered, binding them to the Republic:

*"My mission is to keep peace throughout the galaxy, to promote understanding between all peoples and species, and to respect the dignity of every living being."*

Caleb put his head in his hands.

He didn't know how much later it was when his communicator beeped. "Captain, we have a problem." Hal's voice had never sounded so strangely excited. "A big problem."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Sir. I cannot comment on the nature of the problem over these channels, because the enemy might be listening. We have a VERY BIG problem, at multiple points. I'm really—fired up—"

"You don't mean—"

Hal, typically, threw caution to the winds. "Bomb, sir. Several bombs, actually."

"Shit."

In the *Burnsides'* control room, Caleb leaned over Hal's shoulder to look at the screens. "Here, here, here..." Hal pointed at the locations, where little red beacons glowed like tiny asteroids.

"There must be dozens of them."

"Thirty, so far, to be exact. And they're all set to go off in ten minutes."

"Can we get to them in time? Disarm them?"



“These bombs have an intense encryption system. You have to disable one at a time. It would take me at least an hour to crack the code, assuming that there’s only one code. And even then, it would take at least an hour to get to all of them.”

Caleb ran a hand through his hair. “Okay. Ambassador”. He spoke into his comm. We have multiple bomb threats. You need to evacuate. Now.”

“You can’t be serious! We’ve just started.”

“Sir, if you stay in there, you will die. Please get your people out safely. *All of them.* “

There was a long pause, during which Caleb assumed Cloakial was conferring with his advisors. “Very well. All citizens will evacuate.”

“What about the—servants?”

“This threat is clearly an attempt by Granuaile to derail Bidding Day. I hardly think it is legitimate, and servants’ movements are always impossible to coordinate on days like this. They will remain.”

“But they’ll die! What will your—*profit*—do then?”

Cloakial gave a cold laugh. “There’s always more where they came from. And like I said, this is clearly a bluff. I will see you outside.”

“NO!” Jones lunged for the door, but Hal grabbed her, holding her back. “Jones,” Caleb said. “Stand down.”

Jones wrenched herself away from Hal, panting.

“You wouldn’t be able to get to them on time without getting yourself blown up anyway.” Hal said.

“He’s right,” Caleb said, holding her gaze. A look passed between them.

It was interrupted by a soft chuckle from Hal. “I don’t believe it. Look.” Hal typed in a couple of commands, and the screens changed from images of the complex to a single image of one woman in a purple, plumed hat, giving them all the finger.

“I should have known,” Caleb shook his head, trying his best to hide his smile.

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“They’re evacuating!” Grace watched as Plutonians began to pour from the doors, all of whom seemed to not have taken kindly to the interruption.

“And the slaves are still inside?” she nudged Jethren.

“Yes.”

“I knew they wouldn’t stop to save them.” Grace spoke into her comms, “Dominya, Salt, you in position?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, we’re going in now. Make sure you get them out soon. Dominya, don’t drop the Scrambler until the last possible second. We need as much time as we can get.”

Grace pulled her hood over her head, and Jethren did the same. With their hands and faces painted blue and their hunched, defeated postures, the citizenry didn’t even notice them going through one of the side entrances.

Once they had gotten inside, Grace raced along the corridors. “Plutonians! If you don’t want to blow up, meet me in the ballroom, now! I’m a friend of Basil’s, and the Plutonian Resistance is waiting for you.”

“Basil—the Resistance is real?” One girl with a mark across her cheek tentatively stepped out of one of the doorways. “Are you—are you Granuaile?”

Grace swept off her hood and bowed. “At your service. Can you get everyone to meet us? We only have a few minutes, and then this place is gonna look like a firework, but not in a cool way.”

Jethren sent her a blast of irritation as the girl sprinted in the opposite direction, panting with fear. *Why wouldn't you just tell her the bomb was fake?*

*Because it isn't.*

*You're using the real one he made—*

*It's gonna be a while before they can hold Bidding Day in here again.*

*And also we might DIE.*

“Ouch.” Grace said, wincing at the anger in Jethren’s thoughts.

Jethren just glared.

“Let’s go. I think they left a couple guards behind.” Grace unsheathed her purple sword; its glow lighting her face.

Jethren sighed, pulling out his own bo staff. “I suppose this is why you wanted to come in?”

“I *am* the best swordswoman on the ship.” Grace said. “I have to defend my title.”

Jethren sighed.

They came upon the ballroom rather suddenly, confronting a large set of double doors, which Grace kicked open, much to Jethren’s annoyance.

One of the guards jumped at the sight of her, quickly sprinting toward his weapons, which, apart from his whip, lay discarded in a pile.

“Oh come on,” Grace muttered to Jethren. “They’re not even prepared.”

“You can always head back to the ship.” Jethren said. *Keep yourself from getting killed, or being seen.*

“Attention!” Grace shouted, feeling Jethren’s disappointment wash over her. “I know what you’re all thinking.” She broke into a wide grin. “Yes, it is me. I’m just as beautiful as you imagined. I also rigged a bomb to blow this place up in a couple minutes. So,” She got into her ready stance as the crowd started to bristle with fear, and the guards stepped toward her. “You can either attempt to defeat me, which will be futile and embarrassing. Or you can go and join your little slave-drivers outside, and tell them that Granuaile was too much for you. It’s your choice.”

There was a brief moment of silence, then one guard stepped forward. “I’m not afraid of a little pirate slut.” He said.

“And the first challenger steps up!” Grace declared, winking at Jethren before stepping toward her challenger.

“An honor,” she said, bowing.

The guard didn’t wait for her to stand before he chopped down viciously with his long, wicked-looking sword. It was bright yellow, and crackled with electricity, as light and deadly as a beam of fire.

The crowd gasped, certain that the guard would strike--

But he found only empty air.

Suddenly, the guard roared in pain, his hand going to his leg, where Grace had dived between his legs, moving as quickly and fluidly as smoke.

He stumbled, then whirled and slashed behind him, causing Grace to bend almost completely backwards to avoid the blow. She flipped onto her hands and over, delivering another blow to his upper arm.

“Had enough?” Grace panted. “There’s still time to escape with your life.”

The guard roared and ran full tilt at her again.

Grace shrugged, sidestepped, and beheaded him with one swipe.

“Anyone else wanna try?” she asked, as his head fell to the carpet with a sickening thud, his limbs still twitching. The sword stuttered and then went out.

A blaster beam whooshed by her ear. Grace rolled her eyes, sheathed her sword, and spun at just the right moment for another guard’s shot to go wide, missing her by inches.

In an instant, he was on the ground with a hole in his chest, the round, cone-shaped barrel of Grace’s blaster smoking.

“Anyone else?” she looked directly into the eyes of another guard, who stood at attention, trembling.

Grace blew him a kiss.

The guard fled, and at his example, the rest of them rushed out of the ballroom.

“I still think you enjoy that a little too much.” Jethren said.

“Call me old-fashioned.” Grace said. “A concussion just isn’t enough for some people.”

Jethren looked around at the servants who had slowly filtered in during the fighting.

“We’re here to rescue you!” he called. “This is Granuaile, the Pirate Queen.”

“How do we know we can trust you?”

Grace stepped toward the servant who had spoken, who flinched. She quickly holstered her blaster and held her hands out, showing that they were empty. “Basil sent me.”

The servant narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe you."

Grace sighed. "You can either come with me and live, or stay here and get blown up."

The servant seemed to change his mind. He took a step forward and held out his hand.

"My name is Therem."

Grace took his hand, just as Jethren warned *NO! He has an empathy link.*

Grace fell to her knees, clutching her head as pain exploded. "What—"

The servant fell, Jethren standing over him. "Release her. *Now.*"

"I need to make sure she will not hurt us," the servant said.

"You have what you need. Now you're just trying to find out who she really is." Jethren said. "Release her. Or I will crush your skull from the inside out."

Therem howled and released Grace.

She got to her feet, swaying a little.

"How are you gonna get us out of here?" One of the others asked.

"I'm glad you asked." Grace reached down and pulled Therem to his feet, then clapped her hands.

The ceiling opened and a host of *The Sea Queen's* escape pods, retrofitted with the ugly, brain-like Scramblers atop them, descended, looking like a glowing, rainbow army.

"As many as can fit! Don't worry! No one is getting left behind!"

But her words were drowned out in the stampede of servants, and she quickly rushed to the only purple pod, Jethren at her side.

To her surprise and irritation, one of the servants that joined her was none other than Therem, who still seemed to have a headache from Jethren's mental attack.

“Before you get on,” Grace warned. “If you get in my head, I’m driving this thing into the ground.”

“I just want to know who you are, Granuaile. So as to thank you properly.”

Grace snorted. “I’m the person saving your ass. That’s all that matters.”

Once everyone was situated and cleared for takeoff, Grace hit Dominya’s number.

“Okay, we’re coming out. Turn them on.”

“Got it.” Dominya injected as much anger as she could into the two syllables, but Grace didn’t care.

She was going to bring this whole place down.

\*\*\*

“Hal? How much time?” Caleb, Jones, and Cloakial were standing with the rest of Plutonians across the street from the palace, watching as Plutonians poured out of the building.

“About ten seconds to detonation. 9, 8...”

Hal continued to count down, reaching one just as the last straggler stumbled across the street to the safety zone.

“3...2...1. Boom.” Hal stopped.

The building stood. There wasn’t even a puff of smoke to indicate the multitude of explosives that Hal had detected.

“I knew it!” Cloakial said. “I will have you all court-martialed and sent to prison! I don’t care who your father is. You will rue the day you set foot on—”

Caleb turned to Cloakial, “Ambassador,” he began, with no idea what he was going to say.

It didn’t matter, because suddenly Cloakial turned and vomited all over one of his guards.

Caleb tried to look around, but the world started to spin. His stomach rose in his throat.

*What—*

He tried to speak into his communicator, but it was all he could do to keep his breakfast down. Caleb fell to his knees, trying to take deep breaths.

Jones was on all fours, vomiting all over the shoes of one of the guards.

“Captain?” Hal said. “What’s going on down there? Do you need Medical?”

“N-no—” Caleb forced out. “Some kind of...disorienting device!”

“Captain! I see them!”

Caleb groaned.

“They’re all in some formation of escape pods, coming right out the top. I can get in my fighter. Captain?”

“Hal—” Caleb took a deep breath, then swallowed the vomit that rose up in his throat.

“Hal...” The feeling intensified, along with the buzzing sound of aircraft over head, and Caleb shouted “NO!”

“Captain?”

“Device—must be in the crafts—if you pursue—could crash the ship—stand---down.”

It may have been the nausea, or the world around him spinning, but Caleb could swear he heard a note of satisfaction in Hal’s voice as he said. “Then I suppose that Granuaile and the servants will get away.”

Jones wiped her mouth and raised a fist, exchanging a triumphant glance with Caleb before falling down and vomiting again.

“Good—work.” Caleb said, before falling to his knees and getting sick all over Cloakial’s shoes.



“This has gotta be the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.” Hal said.

Caleb retched again.

With a loud *boom*, the complex exploded, showering the vomiting passersby with debris and clouding the air with dust.

“So there was a bomb.” Hal said.

\*\*\*

The pods sailed through the waterfall at the bottom of their mountains, their heat signatures hidden by Dominya’s brilliant engineering and the dynamics of the landscape.

The Plutonians had been living here for generations, long before they’d ventured into the world of weaponized tech. Long before they’d worried about bottom lines and empire.

Basil rubbed a hand across his eyes as he shook Granuaile’s hand, leaving a streak of black grease behind. “Everything go okay?”

“Fine. Dom says thanks for helping her with the Scrambler.”

“She is welcome at the Eye any time. As are you and your crew.”

“So, are you gonna pay me, or—”

Basil punched her on the shoulder. “You know that this means more to you than that. You don’t fool me.”

“Rebellion doesn’t decorate my bedroom or buy me a new hat, Mr. President.”

“Nor do riches give you that which you seek.”

“And what do I—”

Basil clapped her on the shoulder. “Your money is already on the ship. I loaded it when you all took off. I knew you’d be successful.”

“Well, I work hard to build my brand.”

Basil squeezed her shoulder, but before he could say more, a voice called, “Granuaile! Could I speak to you for a moment?”

Granuaile turned to see Therem, twisting his hands nervously. “Alone?” he prompted, when Grace blinked.

“Of course. Basil, you know how to find me.”

“Good luck, Granuaile. On everything.” Basil walked back through the hangar. One of the servants, whose arm appeared to have been cruelly amputated, rushed toward him. He embraced her, resting his head against hers.

Granuaile turned to Therem. “Got something else you wanna pull out of my head?”

He bowed. “I am sorry for the way I treated you back in the ballroom. The life I have led—the life my people have led for so many generations—it is difficult for us to trust.”

Grace bowed back. “I understand, Therem. And I thank you for your apology.”

“I should warn you, Grace O’Malley—”

“Shut up!”

Therem stopped, and she beckoned him back up the ship’s ramp, slamming it closed behind her.

She leaned forward. “How much do you know?”

Therem looked at her for a long moment, at the snarl in her lips, the light of battle in her eyes. “I know enough. I know you are foolish.”

“You’re welcome.” Grace huffed.

“You are foolish to think that he loves you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Grace sneered.

“Caleb Lewis is like his father. Ambitious, ruthless, part of Admiral Lee’s Navy. You are going to get yourself killed. You are going to destroy the cause.”

Grace shook her head. “You don’t understand. You didn’t—”

“See everything?” Therem’s eyes darkened. “You have loved him since the both of you were children. You think he feels the same. You think that this is a game. He will never truly hurt you because deep down, he loves you. He loves you, and it ensures your victory, for if he loves you, he can learn your side.”

Grace’s eyes filled with tears. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“My people have trusted, and loved, others who thought differently than us. We have thought that love could cure the prejudice of Cloakial and his family. How many of us do you think have tried, over the centuries? And we have all failed.”

Grace shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Therem put a hand on her shoulder, light and firm. “No, Granuaile, it is *you* who are out of your depth.” He reached around her and hit the button to open the ramp again, then released her shoulder, heading back down to the hangar. “Remember my words, Granuaile. Better than you have been defeated by what you hold in your heart.”

Grace’s lip trembled, and she slammed the button for the ramp, nearly throwing Therem from the end in her haste.

*Grace.*

Grace bit her lip, as images of the roof of a treehouse and a basketball court flashed behind her eyes, the glow of Caleb’s blue eyes as they swore they’d be friends forever. The grudging grimace of respect on Mars 9. The longing he’d shown that day at the bar, with her hand in his.

A tear fell onto the console board, and Jethren's voice resounded in her head. *Oh, Grace.*

*I am so sorry.*

*He's wrong.* She wiped the tears from her eyes, facing the horizon squarely.

*He has to be wrong.*

## CHAPTER VI

### ANGELA

**July 8, 2051**

#### **The Academy**

#### **Cape Canaveral, Florida**

*“No one makes it in the Academy trying to be a good person.”*

This is the mantra uttered by every sailor upon their graduation from the Academy. It is a solemn vow of acquittal, an assurance of mutual guilt. The Academy makes sailors, not citizens. Sailors who graduate from the Academy uphold the principles of the Republic by operating above them. They are the strong hand that guides the Republic to its principles of freedom, liberty, and equality.

Once the site of epic space launches, the Naval Academy has been repurposed into a training ground for the future defenders of the Republic, the peacekeepers of the galaxy. Humans and aliens alike would die for a chance to get within the Academy’s stone walls, for their children to have the prosperous and assured future the Academy offers them.

Sailors will see the entire galaxy. They will travel to entire solar systems millions of light years away from home, see things that no one who grows up as poor as some of the new initiates could ever hope to experience. They will never want for food, or healthcare, and every door will be opened.

As long as the taxes are collected in a timely fashion and trade is conducted safely, as long as the right people stay in power, a sailor can do whatever he or she wants.

The sailors are the elite, the most formidable fighters in the entire galaxy. They don’t fail missions. They don’t make mistakes.

Every sailor knows that failure will result in a short, unprotected trip into the vacuum of space, or a heralded position in Admiral Lee's Hall of Achievement, which is lined with those who dared to think their position untenable, their power assured.

The Academy trains the future defenders of the galaxy. It teaches sailors not only how to fight, but how to win. How to seize power and maintain it any cost. How to make life and death decisions that keep you alive from one moment to the next, and keep the Republic safe.

Hence the mantra that every parent tells their child when they enter the Academy, that every cadet tells another when betrayal inevitably becomes more beneficial than loyalty, treachery the most efficient path to power:

*"The Academy does not teach you how to be a good person."*

The words resonated in Caleb's head as he spat blood onto the floor.

He climbed to his feet, squinting through the dizziness to take in the image of his opponent. "Had enough?"

"Isn't that my line?" Ashlynn decked him again. The crowd around them roared as Caleb fell, his elbow slamming into the tile floor.

Caleb knew that some of the instructors were standing at the back of that same crowd, exchanging bets on who would come out the victor. Policies against fighting in the Academy demanded that they intervene, but the Academy's ideology demanded that the fight play out without their interference. Better that the cadets settle this among themselves.

Caleb never should have gotten into this fight.

Still on the ground, he turned to regard the diminutive figure pulling herself to her feet just behind him, leaving a few streaks of blood on the white tile floor. If it hadn't been for her, none of this would have happened.

With her dark skin, small stature, and long braids, she was the antithesis of Ashlynn, who towered over everyone she met and had stringy hair that already seemed like it was starting to recede.

Caleb got to a standing position just in time to see the girl launch herself at Ashlynn again, managing to get a blow in before Ashlynn picked her up and bodily threw her directly into Caleb, knocking him to the ground for the third time in as many minutes.

The girl was a new recruit, no doubt late because of the harvest in the parts of the world that still did regular farming. She was small and skinny, and Caleb had been surprised to discover that she was in the same class as him.

She hadn't said a word to anyone until lunch, when Ashlynn had started in on her usual torment, cornering Rudy, one of the scrawnier new cadets.

"Don't even know why they let you in here." She said as he sniveled on the ground. "Useless." She kicked him in the ribs, and Rudy screamed.

Caleb averted his eyes and focused on his food, which was why he nearly cricked his neck in an effort to turn around as the girl with the braids roared, in a voice that belied her size, "Leave him *alone!*"

Ashlynn laughed when she saw who had yelled at her, not even bothering to get her guard up as she regarded the girl.

The girl's eyebrows furrowed, and she held her fists up in a guard position. "Or I'll make you."

"Oh shit," Caleb said.

"She's crazy." Hal Kellan, Caleb's bunkmate, said, half admiringly. "Ashlynn's going to rip her apart."

Still laughing, Ashlynn grabbed the girl's tiny fists and pushed her, sending her sprawling on her back. Caleb let out an exhale, thinking the fight to be over, but the girl just got to her feet and rushed at Ashlynn, pummeling her in the stomach.

Ashlynn stood there and took the blows, looking down at the girl disinterestedly. Once the girl paused, panting, Ashlynn punched her in the face, sending her to the ground in a spray of blood.

Ashlynn kicked her as she attempted to rise, hissing "Stay down, kid. If you know what's good for you."

But the girl staggered to her feet, and, to Caleb's horror, spat a mouthful of blood and saliva up into Ashlynn's face.

"Shit," Hal whispered. "She's dead."

Ashlynn turned purple with rage, but the girl just grinned maniacally, like she had been expecting this reaction.

"She's crazy," Hal said again.

"Suicidal," Caleb agreed.

Ashlynn hit her again, sending her to the ground, and then started kicking. Over and over. Caleb heard a crack, and grunts of pain from the girl. But she didn't cry out.

And Caleb couldn't take it anymore. He started forward, only to feel someone tugging on his sleeve. "She'll lay you out." Hal said.

Caleb shook his head and rushed at Ashlynn, the momentum knocking her off her feet.

"Back off!" Caleb yelled, which would have been a cool line if Ashlynn hadn't immediately gotten up and punched him so hard, his head snapped almost fully around. He dropped to the ground, head spinning, blood flooding his mouth.



To face the girl with the braids, who *smiled* at him through her bloody teeth.

*What am I doing?*

Caleb shoved the girl off him and got to his feet dizzily, trying to center his balance like the instructors had taught him.

He found his stance just in time for Ashlynn to shove him to the ground again. The air left Caleb's body in a *whoosh!*

"Cowards!" he heard the girl say, voice a little slurred from the punches. "Are you all afraid of her?"

The crowd murmured, but stayed back.

Caleb was really starting to think pretending to be unconscious was a good idea.

And Ashlynn was still laughing.

Caleb took the opportunity to roll toward the girl, who was slowly getting to her feet. He grabbed her hand, and she pulled him up. "Come on," he said. "Leave it. You lost."

"I don't lose."

Before Caleb could protest, the girl rushed at Ashlynn, managing to dive beneath her outstretched arms and land a blow on her ugly pig-nose. Ashlynn howled in pain, blood bursting everywhere, and the girl retreated while Ashlynn flailed about, temporarily blinded.

Knowing they'd only have one chance like this, Caleb rushed at the girl and punched her with all his might.

His hand exploded in pain, but her head snapped to the side, and she fell to the ground, eyes closed, blood trickling from her nose. Out cold.

Caleb screamed in pain, cradling his hand. He was pretty sure he'd broken his thumb. He bowed his body over it, and he was so engrossed in the pain that he didn't realize the crowd was roaring.

"LEWIS! LEWIS! LEWIS!"

Caleb raised his eyes to the girl, who said, "Don't keep your thumb inside your fist next time."

She patted him on the shoulder and limped away, parting the crowd with a wave of her bloody hands.

Hal clapped Caleb on the back, making him wince. "Oh, sorry. That was awesome!"

"Who was that girl?"

"I don't know. But I think I'm in love with her."

Caleb tried to roll his eyes, but his head hurt too much. "I'm going to the Medical Bay."

"LEWIS! LEWIS! LEWIS!"

Caleb winced as the cheers got louder. "Guess I get to be in charge now."

"Guess you're gonna need me to watch your back more than usual," Hal said, slinging a hand over Caleb's shoulder.

"Great." Caleb winced as a wave of pain went through his head.

Before they could turn the corner that led to the infirmary, Caleb stopped. "Wait." Wincing, he retraced his steps back to Ashlynn, who seemed to be coming to, blinking groggily. One of the instructors knelt beside her, pressing a napkin to the blood flowing from her nose.

"You think she'll be okay?" he asked Hal, who was standing with his arms crossed.

Hal shook his head. "You'd give a pirate a cell, wouldn't you?"

"What?"

Hal rolled his eyes. “You’re concussed. Let’s get out of here.”

The younger girl arrived in the Medical Bay sometime later, but Caleb was too doped up on pain medication to say anything as she was scolded by the doctor. He fell asleep to the sound of her voice, low with irritation.

Caleb woke in the middle of the night to find her wide awake, watching a documentary on ancient battle techniques on her phone and holding an ice pack to her head.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to have those,” Caleb whispered, indicating the phone.

The girl flipped him off.

Caleb sat up, leaning over, “I have a concussion and a broken thumb.”

“Cracked ribs, internal bleeding, minor concussion.” The girl’s voice was hard and flat. “I’ve had worse.”

“Why did you do that?”

She paused the video and looked at him. “Do what?”

Caleb let out a breath of air. “Ashlynn. The fight. You didn’t have to do that. Do you know Rudy or something?”

“No. I don’t know anyone. I only got here a couple days ago.”

“She almost *killed* you!”

The girl shrugged.

“Come on. Why?”

She shook her head, but he could see a smile peeking at the corner of her mouth.

“What?”

“If you have to ask me why I stopped a bully, maybe we’re less alike than I thought we were.”

“Alike?”

“You got in the fight, too. I thought you were like me.”

“Like you?”

“That you weren’t just here to shoot some pirates and see the galaxy. I thought you wanted to help people.”

Caleb tipped his head to the side, clutching it as it spun. “What’s your name?”

She paused, searching his face. “Jones.”

“What’s your first name?”

The girl was silent.

“Fine. Jones—you need to keep your head down. Otherwise, you’ll get yourself killed. At the Academy—”

“You don’t become a good person,” she said. “I know.”

“Then why didn’t you just walk away?”

“Because I think being a sailor is about *not* walking away.” She said.

Caleb looked at her for a long moment, a grin unfurling across his face.

She scowled. “What?”

“I think we’re gonna be friends.”

She scoffed. “Whatever you say, Commander’s Son.”

The next morning, Caleb cast a glance at her medical chart just before the doctor came in. “Angela,” he whispered to her when she woke up, and they both noticed the light in her eyes when he said it.

“You’re the only who gets to call me that.”

## CHAPTER VII

### HIDARI

**October 28, 2054**

#### *The Sea Queen*

Grace was sleeping in a hammock, soothed by the lull of the dishwasher in the kitchen, when she heard a loud *thump* from above the deck.

At first, she didn't move. She was sore from training with Jax, and she could tell by her grogginess that she'd have to be up in a few hours, making sure that breakfast was set up for the crew.

She'd been on the ship for two months, and Paladin still hadn't thrown her off. He hadn't stopped threatening to do it, though. Every time a spot on the deck wasn't cleaned properly. Every time she was a few minutes late for kitchen duty. "*Don't make me open the airlock, Grace.*"

At first, Grace figured she may as well let the rest of the crew deal with the noise. *They*, after all, were allowed to have weapons outside of training. They could save the ship from invaders. She needed her rest.

But curiosity drew the sleep out of her eyes. She sat up, swinging her feet over the edge of the hammock and fumbling for her boots. At least she could figure out what the noise was. Maybe the gossip would get the cook, Tommy, to give her more than the burnt pieces of toast the rest of the crew didn't want. The only things he seemed to care about were the crew members' personal lives and whether the bacon would be shipped on time.

Grace got to her feet and padded softly to the staircase leading to the upper levels, a long, twisting spiral that seemed to absorb sound. As she ascended, she could make out the deep timbre of Captain Paladin, as well as the harsher, gruff voice of Seaworth.

Grace hesitated. Paladin had agreed to let her stay against Seaworth's advice. Seaworth still watched her in the mess hall, his grey eyes following her like a predator, like the wolves she used to watch on nature documentaries. Waiting for her to show weakness, so he could cut her away from the safety of the crowd.

If he caught her out here, alone at night, clearly somewhere she wasn't supposed to be...

Grace bit her lip and took another step. Like Hell she'd let a bully like Seaworth determine where she went and when. Like Hell she'd let him intimidate her.

She slid through the door, crouching behind a pile of empty crates. The deck shone with the light from the artificial ceiling, which looked like the night sky on some planet other than Earth. There were two blue moons in the sky, and the stars seemed closer. Like someone had dialed up the magnification.

Paladin and Seaworth's hulking figures stood near stern, where the navigational consoles rested. Someone sat in the pilot's chair. Grace craned her neck, but she couldn't make out any defining features. She was pretty sure the figure had long hair.

"—bring her below," Paladin was saying. "Start her tomorrow."

The figure replied in a foreign language. Grace had never heard it before—it was thick, syrupy, like it oozed from the person's mouth. They sounded upset.

Grace crept along the side of the deck, moving as quietly as she could through the crates. She raced across an open stretch of ground, then crouched behind the weapons consoles.

The girl was—beautiful. She had deep purple skin, and bright white hair. Long and wild, it seemed to have a mind of its own, the tendrils extending toward Seaworth, shaking threateningly in the air.

Before the conflict could escalate, Paladin stepped in front of Seaworth, his hands held out, “You will leave my first mate alone, or I’ll take you back where you came from.”

Grace frowned. They hadn’t landed on a planet in weeks, choosing instead to use all their resources to get to Daarthur, which would be far enough from Earth that no one would recognize Grace. So where had they found this girl? How did she get here?

Suddenly, Seaworth seemed to notice eyes on him. He turned, and Grace pulled back into the shadows, praying that he hadn’t seen her, but--

“Someone’s here,” Seaworth said.

Grace heard the *thunk* of boots striding to her hiding place and took off, edging back toward the crew’s quarters. She flung the door open and threw herself through it, shutting it carefully behind her.

Grace listened to the heavy tread of footsteps, looming ever closer.

She could run down the staircase, but Seaworth would hear her. If he opened the door, he’d see her. And then she’d probably find out exactly how cold space was.

The doorknob turned. Grace closed her eyes.

“Seaworth, what the Hell are you doing?” Paladin shouted. “I need your help out here.”

“Someone saw—”

“They’re going to find out about her eventually. Get out here!”

Seaworth swore, then his footsteps receded. Above, Grace could hear the girl speak, in Common this time, “Stay. Back.”



*Thump.*

“Why did you knock her out?”

“I didn’t touch her!” Seaworth protested. “The Navy might have done something to her while she was waiting for us.”

“Let’s get her to the infirmary.” Paladin sounded worried. “Do you think they’ve tracked her?”

“It’s standard for her people.” Seaworth said. “The Navy doesn’t believe in pacifism.” Their voices were getting quieter as they walked toward the infirmary, which was all the way on the opposite side of the ship.

Grace exhaled.

She crept down the staircase, barely daring to breathe until she got back in her hammock..

Who was the girl? And *what* was she?

Grace’s mind raced with possibilities, but she came up with nothing.

She only knew one thing.

Grace hoped that the girl would stay.

Grace watched Dominya pluck a roll from the serving tray with narrowed eyes. The Hidari girl didn’t even glance in her direction as she took her food over to Pleiades and sat, sweeping her long hair behind her.

Grace had just about given up trying to talk to Dominya. It was obvious she didn’t want to be friends.

Grace couldn't understand why. Salt, the only other person around their age, had been Grace's friend practically from the beginning. He'd offered to help her with whatever menial task Captain Paladin had assigned her for the day. He'd helped her ask his father, Jax, for weapons training.

Dominya wouldn't even so much as *look* at Grace.

Grace had tried everything. She'd saved the best biscuits for when Dominya went through the line. Offered to help her with her laundry when she emerged from the engine room, covered in grease. Even deliberately tripped during training with Jax on the deck when Dominya walked by, just to make her laugh.

Dominya didn't even crack a smile.

At their table, Pleiades pulled a tiny model of a ship out of her pocket, and she and Dominya started prodding it with their forks.

Grace put down her serving tongs and wandered onto the deck, stretching her shoulders and arms. When she got to the rail, she swung a leg over it, leaning into the stretch.

At least she still had these training sessions with Jax and Salt. She was beginning to think that these trainings were the only reason she hadn't hurled herself through one of the airlocks out of boredom.

That, and the fiery feeling in her gut that she got whenever she thought about her parents. Maybe Grace was completely alone in the universe, but she wasn't going to give the Republic the satisfaction of letting that consume her.

No, Grace O'Malley would live. And she would show the Republic that they'd been foolish to not kill her like they'd killed her parents. She would destroy the Republic, one sailor at a time, until all that was left was the Admiral himself.

Suddenly, a particular sailor flashed behind Grace's eyes. One who no doubt was fully immersed in the Academy by now.

For a moment, the image of the sky that showed through the bubble dome was replaced by Caleb, the night she'd left. Those teasing, arresting blue eyes. The blush that rose to his cheeks when he argued. The way he'd tap his fingers against his palm when he was about to say something he knew she wouldn't like.

The way that he always made her feel safe, even when she was afraid.

He probably thought she was dead, too. He probably thought she'd died a traitor.

Grace's heart clenched painfully, and for a moment, she wondered if he could feel it. If she felt strongly enough, would he be able to sense it across the millions of light years that separated them?

She was still thinking about Caleb and her family, her thoughts chasing themselves around in circles, when Salt kicked at her knees, forcing them to buckle beneath her.

Unperturbed, Grace dropped to the ground, launching into a spin-kick that sent Salt's legs, long and unwieldy at his age, slipping out from beneath him.

The air left Salt's lungs in a *whoosh*, but in moments he was laughing, pulling himself to his feet. "Why do you always get the better of me?"

Grace flipped a piece of hair out of her eyes. "Never let your guard down," she said, echoing one of Jax's platitudes. "An enemy always attacks when a warrior is at his weakest."

Before Salt could say anything, Grace felt a sharp blow to her knees again, this time so absolute that it knocked her flat onto her back.

She lay there, stunned, as she heard a deep chuckle from above her. A large, callused hand came into view, and she grasped it.

“I—wasn’t—ready.” She huffed, still trying to get her breath back.

Jax looked down at her from his enormous height, his smile stretching the snake tattooed across his cheek. “An attack can come at any time, Grace.” He reminded, his dark grey eyes so like his son’s.

Unlike his son, however, Jax’s expression held a measure of tension beneath his surface. Like a placid lake on a summer day that concealed some monster in the depths. Ready to explode into savage, ruthless action at any moment.

That nonchalant attitude, that calm demeanor, was as much deception as anything else. Jax had told Salt and Grace of the numerous times that someone had thought that his easygoing demeanor made him an easy target.

They were quickly and brutally disavowed of that notion.

“What are we doing today?” Grace asked, even as Jax sighed. She knew that he was reining her in, trying to find a way to break the fierce pride that she’d established through her training.

“Overconfidence is your downfall.” He’d said to her once. “Stop acting like you can’t make mistakes.”

“It’s not that I can’t. I *won’t*.” Grace said.

“You *will*, and with your level of recklessness, they will get you killed.”

“Then I’ll get killed.”

Jax’s eyes had turned to steel. “We’re done for today.”

He hadn’t let her train for a week.

Even now, Grace was careful not to seem too eager. Too confident. Even if she was progressing at twice the rate of even Salt. Even if she was better than most of the crew, even though she'd only been training for a month or so.

Jax had shown her flails, blasters, and even rocket launchers. He'd shown her how to fight someone who was holding a knife, how to distract someone with a blaster or duck under the guard of a cutlass. He'd even shown her how to take on someone hand-to-hand, though he stressed that because of her size, it wasn't a good idea to get in close.

Sometimes, Jax reminded her so much of her father...

"I want you and Salt, knife defense drills." Salt said, snapping Grace back to the present.

"Do we get our own weapons?"

"Your bodies are your weapons today." Jax said, pulling a long, wicked knife from his toolbelt and tossing it over one hand.

"Aren't you at least gonna use the practice ones?" Salt asked, his eyes fixed on the edge in his father's hand. His head barely reached Grace's shoulder.

Jax shrugged. "Just don't get hit."

Grace smiled, while Salt's gaze remained fixed on the knife. "Let's go."

They had moved onto to Grace's specialty, swords, when Dominya and Pleaides walked onto the deck.

Grace was smiling, loving the weight of the practice sword in her hand. Jax had taken her through every weapon they had, just to get her familiar, but Grace had known her weapon the moment she held it in her hand.

A short sword, just longer than a dagger. The kind of weapon that could function in any space, that was as easy to wield as an extension of Grace's arm.

"Faster!" Jax barked, as Grace moved to block his strike. "What are you doing next? Don't tell me—just *move!*"

Grace lunged, and Jax whirled away, laughing. "You'll have to do better than that!"

Even through her focus, Grace felt Dominya's eyes focus on her, and a rush of giddiness swept over her. She turned to give the Hidari girl a self-assured wink—

Then she was looking up at the ceiling of stars, her head spinning. Her sword clattered out of her hand. "Never lose focus!" Jax warned. He knelt down next to her ear so that no one else could hear, "Especially when a pretty girl walks by." Grace's face turned bright red, and she bit her lip.. "Shut up."

Jax grinned, hauling her to her feet. "You all right?" His frown made the tattoo of the mermaid on his face droop slightly.

In answer, Grace sprinted toward her sword, picking it up and turning to face Jax.

Jax rushed at her, and she dodged him, kicking him in the back so that he stumbled. Jax turned, nodding approvingly. He'd been teaching her that move for ages, but she'd never been fast enough.

Grace grinned back, and then they were fighting again, and everything else in the world turned to nothing, insubstantial and insignificant. There was nothing but this, the exchange of blows and the flurry of their feet as they moved around each other.

In spite of their clashes, Grace loved fighting with Jax. He didn't go easy on her because of her size or her age. He didn't make fun of her for not being strong enough to hit as hard as the

adults on the ship. And he was patient enough to let her tire herself out trying to attack him, then show her where she went wrong, when she was tired enough to actually listen.

When Grace and Jax finally ended their training session, Dominya and Pleiades were gone.

That night, Grace awoke to shouting and the clamor of weapons, mingled with screams of the dying.

Grace jumped to her feet, nearly falling out of her hammock in her haste. She checked the position of the dagger in her belt and rushed to the elevator, only to see Jax waiting there for her, his arms crossed. “Absolutely not.”

“What are you talking about? We’re under attack.”

“And the *adults* will take care of it.”

Grace could feel her face reddening. “When will you stop holding me back?”

Jax ran a hand through his hair, and the mermaid twitched. “Salt’s sitting this one out. So are you. Captain’s orders. Which is why—” he leaned forward, making direct eye contact. “I am following orders and telling you to *stay out of it*. And then I am going up there to kick some ass. I am telling you. *Do not go up there*.” He winked.

Grace frowned, and Jax rolled his eyes, speaking even more slowly. “So. I’ll be up there. Probably close to starboard. If you need me while you’re down here. *As the captain ordered*.”

Grace opened her mouth as comprehension dawned. Jax leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, then hopped backwards into the open elevator, grabbing something from behind him and tossing it at Grace as he did so.

It was heavy and wrapped in cloth, with a hilt peeking out.

“In case you need it” Jax said. He pulled out his own longsword, pressing the button on the side to activate it so that it glowed a bright green. “Please don’t make me babysit you.”

Grace unwrapped the object to pull out a wicked, purple sword. It was made of the finest steel, she could tell, and she nearly cut herself on the edge of the blade as she pulled it out of the wrapping.

There was a button in the shape of a star on the handle, and Grace pressed it, and gasped.

The sword lit up in a crackling purple plasma. She could feel the heat.

Grace smiled. “Thanks, Jax”

Jax saluted her with his own weapon as the lift doors closed.

Grace waited a few seconds, then dashed to the staircase.

Grace raced up the steps, in such a hurry to try out her new weapon that at first she didn’t notice the figure huddled against the wall.

She turned, guard up, then stopped.

“Dominya? Are you hurt?”

Dominya shook her head, but her eyes shone with unshed tears. She had the most beautiful eyes, dark and glowing at the same time, intensifying the longer Grace looked into them.

Grace shook herself. There wasn’t time for this now. She had things to do, a battle to fight, her worth to prove.

“Well, there’s a fight, so I’m just—”

“Pleiades is dead.” Dominya whispered.

Grace stopped sidling toward the door. “What?”



Dominya took a breath. “Sailors--just came up behind her. She was showing me the way the pulleys for the Sails and Shields worked, and I didn’t even *see*—” Her face contorted like she was trying not to cry.

“It’s okay,” Grace said automatically, not sure what to do. On the one hand, Dominya was clearly upset. But on the other hand, the Navy was invading, and Dominya’s emotions would matter little if the ship was captured.

“I need your help.” Dominya said. “I’m not trained like you. My family—they were the *peaceful* type.” Her jaw tightened. “I have to get to the engine room and reinstall the shields so I can implement a Ghost to throw off their trace and deactivate their navigational hyperspace mechanisms.”

Grace blinked. “You need to get to the engine room?”

Dominya nodded. “I tried to go down there, but there are too many of them. I need someone to clear a path for me.”

Grace thought for a moment, then held out her hand. Dominya took it, and a thrill went through Grace. A warmth, that spread through her limbs from where her palm rested against Dominya’s.

Grace looked at their entwined hands for a moment, then shook herself. “You ready?”

Dominya took a deep breath, her hair writhing around her head, and they stepped up the last few stairs to the deck together.

As soon as they burst through the doors, the chaos of the battle assaulted them on all sides. There were the screams of the wounded, mingled with flashes of blaster fire and the crash as some of the crates left on deck burst apart. Weapons clanged against each other as some of the sailors moved into close quarters with the pirates.

As Grace watched, Jax ducked beneath the blow of a sailor and twisted his wrist, shoving the sailor forward so that he was skewered on his own blade. As he did so, another sailor crept up behind him, but Seaworth was already there with his electric battle axe, decapitating the sailor in a single swipe.

A round of blaster fire hit Seaworth on the back of the thigh, but that only seemed to enrage the large man as he rushed forward, his axe smiting everything within reach.

“Grace! Grace!” Dominya yelled in her ear, and that, along with a *whoosh* of blaster fire that flew by her ear, nearly burning her skin, finally brought her back to her senses. She sighted the entrance to the control room, right in the thick of the fighting.

Grace tightened her grip on her sword as a surge of adrenaline sang through her veins. She looked at Dominya, and that same thrill went through her again. By the way Dominya’s hand jolted in hers, Grace could tell she felt it, too. “Hang onto me, and block when you can.” Grace shouted.

“With WHAT?”

But Grace was already sprinting, dodging and ducking around whirling figures, the brightly colored jets of light from the blasters.

She slashed with her sword, and a sailor fell in front of her, his throat spurting blood into the air like water from a fountain, but she didn’t stop to look, because she was still moving, falling, flying, Dominya a half-step behind her.

Grace remembered little about that first fight, the first time in her entire life she’d used a sword and meant it, the first time she’d started to earn her legendary name, but it didn’t matter. Dominya and the rest of the crew remembered it well enough, and the stories they told at ports all over the galaxy spread and grew the image of Grace, whirling across that deck.

She was ruthless, fearless, the purple light from her sword trailing around her, anticipating moves before they happened, moving between and around every fight so that the poor sailors tripped over themselves to get to her.

She was smiling as she ran and ducked, teeth bared like a demon, glorying in the kills.

After a few minutes, Dominya managed to match her steps to Grace's, and the two moved almost as one, Grace moving to block every blow that Dominya didn't avoid.

"It was like she had some magical shield over her," Dominya would say to a crowd of intrigued pirates at the next dive bar they snuck into. "And nothing could touch me because nothing could touch her."

Everyone smiled knowingly at the awe in Dominya's voice.

What Grace remembered most was the triumphant look on Jax's face as he caught her eye, and the look of pure fury that turned Captain Paladin a shade of purple never before seen in a human being.

She was invincible.

Dominya and Grace emerged on the other side of the deck and threw open the door to the engine room. They stepped over the bodies of the sailors, none of whom stood a chance against Grace and her flaming purple sword.

When they made it inside, Grace pushed Dominya toward the controls, the blinking and whirring consoles and the bright screens that scrolled through endless lists of data. "Hurry! I'll hold them off!"

The cogs on the walls next to the screen were making grating sounds against one another, and the screens all around them flashed red 'error' signs.

Dominya grabbed a wrench from below one of the panels and sprinted to the cogs. “This is gonna take a minute!” she shouted.

“Good,” Grace said quietly, as another sailor rushed forward.

Once Dominya re-established the Ghost feature on the hyperdrive, the Sailors started to retreat, as it became impossible for their ship to track them if *The Sea Queen* jumped to hyperspace.

Of the ones who remained to fight, the pirates left none alive.

Grace was smiling throughout, up until the end.

At the end of the hallway, she could make out two figures fighting. One of them was clearly a sailor with his black uniform and wide stance. He had a combat knife, and he was slashing at a diminutive-looking pirate, who whimpered as the blade sliced his skin.

A pirate smaller than even Grace, with a shock of blonde hair—

“SALT!” Grace sprinted for them. He must have snuck into the fight.

Before she could get close enough, the sailor fled, leaving Salt to crumple on the ground.

Salt was screaming, screaming and clutching at one of his eyes, where blood poured from between his fingers.

And Grace suddenly couldn’t breathe. She fell to her knees, taking him in her arms. Her hands shaking, she grabbed a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it to Salt’s eye as he sobbed and shook. He wouldn’t remove his hand from his eye, so she just pressed the handkerchief over it.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she whispered, but she didn’t think Salt could hear her, so loud were his screams. And she said the words often enough that they became meaningless, until she

forgot that she was saying them, forgot that she was holding onto her one remaining friend in the universe, forgot that he might be dying, forgot...

When Jax finally found them and pried Salt from her arms, Grace slumped against the wall, her eyes wide and vacant.

Dimly, Grace was aware that her shirt and pants were soaked in blood, and she tried to remember whose it was. How many sailors had she killed?

Had she killed one who looked as young as her? With golden hair, and deep blue eyes? Had he asked for mercy? Had he called her name? Would she have noticed? Would she have *cared*?

The next thing she knew, Captain Paladin was kneeling next to her. "Grace. *Grace*."

Seaworth's gruff voice came next. "I thought you told Jax she wasn't ready."

Paladin shook his head. "They never are." He reached out to Grace, but she flinched away.

"Come on. You need to get cleaned up. It's over. It's all over." He knelt down and, ever so gently, pulled Grace to her feet. Something about the movement broke a dam inside her, and she collapsed against his chest, sobbing.

"Shhh. I know. I know." Paladin stroked her hair. "I know."

Dominya emerged from engine room.

"Ship's fixed. We're good to go, Captain." Her eyes widened as she caught sight of Grace, crying into Paladin's arms like a child. "Everything okay?"

Grace felt Paladin nod.

Dominya took a deep breath. "Pleiades is dead."

“We know. She’s on deck getting wrapped into a shroud, if you’d like to pay your respects.”

Dominya nodded and walked back along the passageway, nearly stumbling over the bodies.

Grace’s victims. *How many did I kill? What if it had been him? What if he’s here somewhere, slashed to pieces?*

*“Murderer.” Chief Anders spat the title at her like venom, at the body of her father, lying in a pool of his own blood. “Murderer.”*

Grace didn’t look at the bodies as Paladin led her out onto the deck, but she still saw them. She didn’t think she’d ever stop seeing them.

Grace stood next to Paladin as he lit a halo around the heads of Pleiades and the other crew members who had died and launched them into space, along with the bodies of the sailors.

Grace’s hands shook, so she stuck them behind her back.

She didn’t move the whole ceremony, and not a tear escaped her eyes. It was as if she’d turned to stone. As if everything inside her had hurt so much, that it had turned frozen and solid. Numb.

The numbness persisted for the next few days, even as rumors of her exploits spread across the ship. Crew members who had never given her the time of day patted her on the back and invited her to drink with them, and even Seaworth seemed unable to find something to criticize.

But Grace was finding it more and more difficult to smile, to gain interest in food and fighting and the things that had sustained her before. Even the thought of vengeance against the

Republic barely made her stir. The Republic was numberless, as vast as the galaxy. And she was just one damaged, wronged girl.

She felt as though she were floating, lost in an infinite sea of cold and stars, one of the bodies they'd pushed into space, an unknown and endless void.

She stopped sleeping.

She would walk the deck at night and practice her exercises, refusing to stop until her limbs shook with exhaustion and her entire body was covered in sweat.

That was where Dominya found her one day, a full week after the battle.

Grace had just finished an attack combination with a practice sword, and she was standing with her hands on her knees, panting, when Dominya walked up.

Grace immediately straightened, trying to control her breathing. Her burning curiosity about Dominya, her frustration that the other girl had barely noticed her, had been snuffed out after the battle.

Maybe Dominya didn't want to be friends, but Grace didn't, either.

Even so, their eyes followed each other around the room, always turning away when the other wasn't looking. Like they were still holding hands, about to dash across the deck. Still connected.

Dominya nodded at her and walked over to the bench near the edge of the dome.

Grace had had it set on Kansas at the full moon, and instead of changing it to her home planet, Dominya left it there, gazing upward at the source of golden light.

"Is the Moon on Earth always so orange?"

Grace half-smiled. "it's called the Harvest Moon. It was my favorite season of the year."

"Why?"

Grace thought for a moment. “It was like the whole world was changing around you,” she said finally. “But in a good way. The trees change colors, and the air gets cold, and there’s this tinge of anticipation in the air.”

“Anticipation for what?”

“Christmas, kind of.”

“Oh!” Dominya nodded. “I’ve read about Christmas! Is there really a man who breaks into your house and leaves presents?”

Grace laughed for the first time in days. “No.” She sat on the bench beside Dominya, a little closer than she needed to be. “That’s a legend; it’s mostly kids who believe it. But it’s part of it.”

“Part of—” Dominya fumbled around for the word. “The anticipation.”

“It’s like—everything wonderful is happening so much, that anything can happen. It’s when you really feel like you’re a second away from—” Grace looked down, the memories flooding through her. She turned her head away from Dominya. “It’s stupid.”

Grace felt cold fingers on her chin, gently tugging her face back toward Dominya’s. Dominya smiled as she swept her thumb under Grace’s eye, where a tear had started to fall. “It doesn’t sound stupid at all,” she said.

And Grace’s chest warmed again for the first time in days, tingles spreading across her body like a limb after it had fallen asleep. Painful and intoxicating all at once.

Eventually, Dominya let go of Grace’s chin, turning back toward the Moon. They watched the Moon in silence for a long time, until Grace finally started to feel the sleepless nights catch up with her.

She was about to say goodnight when Dominya said, “My parents were diplomats.”



“What?”

“I know you’ve been wondering about me. My parents were the Hidarian ambassadors to the Admiral.”

“Oh.” Grace said. “So you’re part of the Republic?”

Dominya shook her head, biting her lip. Her hair waved around her head, one of the strands brushing against Grace’s face.

Grace grabbed it, tugging on it gently. “Dom,” she said quietly. “You can tell me.”

Dominya’s hair fell to her shoulders again, and she took a deep breath before continuing. “They were working for the Rebellion. I didn’t even know, until the Sailors came to my door, and they—they *took* them. In the middle of the day.”

“How did you escape?”

Dominya reached inside her shirt and pulled out a locket of purple crystal. She pressed it, and a hologram of a stately woman with long, white hair, who could only be Dominya’s mother, emerged. “If you are reading this, your father and I are already dead. I know it’s hard to understand. We love you so much. We were trying to build a better universe for you, for your children—”

She clenched her fist, and the hologram disappeared. “She told me Paladin’s secret code.”

“Paladin has a secret code?”

Dominya nodded. “A transmission signal to members of the Rebellion in case they get in a tight spot. I hid out for a few days, putting out his signal over the transmission channels, hoping he’d get it through all the traffic. I wasn’t sure if—if he’d come.”

“So the Navy is looking for you?”

“I think they may have attacked because of me.”

And at Dominya's confession, the guilt coloring her words, Grace thought about telling the truth. She thought about telling someone other than Paladin who she really was. What she had done.

But she couldn't. The numbness was still holding her heart in its white-fingered hand, and she was afraid that if she brought that memory back, worse things would happen.

She was afraid that memory would confirm what Dominya must have thought when she saw her the night of the battle.

She was afraid, most of all, that Dominya would look at her with the same disgust that she held for the sailors who had killed her parents.

*"Murderer."*

"I'm sorry, Dom," Grace said instead. "I can't imagine what that must be like."

"My parents were arrested for trying to stop an attack on the capital. A bombing they'd say was done by pirates, so Hidari would ask for Naval occupation. Thousands would have died, if they hadn't stopped it. Thousands probably will anyway."

Grace squeezed her hand.

"Promise me," Dominya went on, turning to her, the Moon casting light across her face. "Promise me, when you become captain—"

"What?" Grace laughed, the somber moment broken by the absurdity of Dominya's statement.

"—When you become captain," Dominya continued, as if Grace had not spoken. "Promise you'll show mercy. No loss of life if surrender is possible. No bombs."

"I'm not going to be captain!"

And even though Dominya looked the same age as Grace, she suddenly seemed much older as she said, “Paladin will pick you over Seaworth. You have to promise me.”

Grace linked her fingers more firmly with Dominya’s, holding their hands up to the light of the Moon. Dominya’s eyelashes sparkled in the light, and Grace leaned in, their lips a whisper apart.

“I promise.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### CATCH

***Captain's Log: December 2, 2058***

*Granuaile—Grace—the Pirate Queen—champion of the Rebellion. The daughter of rebel sympathizers. Drug runner. Smuggler.*

*Granuaile, the pirate whose brutality knows no bounds, who leaves trails of blasted-out ships and shattered families in her wake...*

*How much of that is true?*

*What have I defended in the name of the Republic? What names do my enemies curse me with that I might view as lies, but are only a matter of perspective?*

*There are too many questions chasing themselves around in my head.*

*I need to see her again. Even if it's only at the end of my cutlass.*

*I don't think I ever stopped missing her. I think it's always been a part of me, a hurt so far back and so deeply buried that I ceased to acknowledge it, but felt it all the same. A scar whose injury had long since faded into memory, became such an integral part of my appearance that I ceased to notice it.*

*Until I saw her again, and the wound reopened.*

*All of that missing rushed back into my consciousness when I saw her in LA, like blood to the site of an injury. All of those feelings I thought had been childhood fancy, the bitterness of a shattered illusion. The horror when my mother told me that she was gone.*

*And I know I have to see her again.*

*But I am afraid of what that means.*

**December 3, 2058**

***The Burnsides***

“Granuaile’s device caused intense vertigo.” Caleb said. “We were all momentarily incapacitated while she and the—*servants*—escaped.”

Lee surveyed Caleb through the tips of his fingers, then nodded at someone offscreen. A jolt of electricity shot through the Irons, radiating from Caleb’s wrists through his bones. Caleb gritted his teeth.

“I see.” Lee said. He ran a hand around the edges of his mustache. He smiled, his black eyes gleaming as he watched Caleb. “And why did your crew leave the remaining Plutonians unguarded?”

Caleb gulped, willing himself not to take his wrists from the Irons. They were the Admiral’s own invention, his way of keeping his Navy in check, even if millions of light years separated them. The last captain to take off the Irons hadn’t made it out of the conference before an order from the Admiral ended him.

“Cloakial ordered us not to evacuate them, since they were only—”he stopped.

“Only slaves.” Commander Lewis finished. He sat stiff-backed next to the Admiral, his face tight as he regarded his son. “Didn’t it occur to you that Granuaile had planted the explosives in order for you to leave them unguarded?”

“Yes, Commander.” Caleb’s body tensed as Admiral Lee tilted his head. “But I had to ensure the safety of my---”

The electricity jolted through him again.

“You had to ensure the safety of no one, Captain Lewis.” Admiral Lee said. “Your poor judgement is more than enough to warrant you and your crew’s position in my Hall.” His eyes glistened, and Caleb felt a chill go up his spine as the Admiral said, “If we were having this conversation on Earth, it would be with your headless corpse.”

The Admiral nodded again, and Caleb was conscious only of blinding, ripping agony. As the pain started to subside, he heard his father’s harsh words. “The Admiral has agreed after my intercession to let you rectify this mistake. Do not disappoint us again.”

“So?” Jones asked as soon as Cal exited the conference chamber. “How did it go?” She eyed the electrical burns on his wrists, the sweat dripping off his forehead. “That bad, huh?”

“The Admiral was—disappointed in our inability to capture Granuiale.” Caleb rolled his wrists, wincing. He looked at the long, silvery hallway and sighed. The infirmary was all the way on the other side of the ship, and his entire body was practically trembling from the continuous shocks.

Jones paced around him impatiently, rattling questions at him like the bars of a cage. “Did he call you back to Earth?”

“No.” Caleb winced as pain lanced up from his bruised knees. “But unless we figure this out, we’re on our way to becoming pirates ourselves.”

“You’re the Commander’s son. No way Lee would ever dare take you on.”

Caleb fixed his eyes on the hallway in front of him, willing himself to ignore the pain. “Dad wasn’t too happy with me, either.”

“What about Cloakial?”

A spasm shot through his hamstring, and Caleb walked over to the wall, leaning against it and carefully placing his hands on his knees.

Jones stopped pacing. He could see her boots out of the corners of his vision.

“They don’t care at all, do they?”

“Commander Lewis made it clear that I had caused a great loss to ‘The wealth of the Republic.’”

Jones was silent. Then, “I won’t do it again. I’ll die first.”

“You don’t mean that.”

The right boot tapped a rhythm on the floor. “I already enabled a slaver to walk free. What more can they do to me?”

Caleb stood and took her hand, pulling her along the corridor.

“What are you doing? Let go of me!”

Caleb hauled her along until they reached his office, his pain a pulsing ball of light at the edge of his consciousness. He slammed the door behind them and rounded on her.

“I just had to fight for my life back there,” he hissed. “Admiral Lee was *this* close to getting on the nearest transport and hailing the ship so that he could throw me—throw us—into his Hall. You have *no idea* what you’re dealing with.”

Jones faced him squarely. “I told you before. I’m not afraid of them.”

“Well I am!” Caleb said. “And if you want to stay breathing and on this ship, you will be too. Is that clear, First Mate?”

Jones looked down at their hands, still clasped together. “Are you threatening me?” she said quietly.

“Angela—”

“Don’t call me that.” She stepped closer to him, close enough that he knew she could read the hesitation in his eyes. The fear that lingered there. “Don’t call me that when you don’t mean it.”

Caleb reached out to touch her cheek, trying to recall the way they’d come together before. The smoothness of her skin. The way she fit her lips to his, like it was the easiest thing in the world.

And then Grace’s face swam in front of his eyes.

Caleb drew his hand back, just before it touched her skin.

Jones gasped and took a step back. Hurt blossomed across her cheeks. Her hand dropped to her side. “Why?”

Caleb tried to find an explanation, some reason that would appease her, that would make sense. But he could never lie to Jones. They were too much alike.

Before he could say anything, the door opened. “Captain?” It was Hal, leaning over the threshold, his eyes flickering between the two of them. “I need to speak with you about the security system.”

“Do you need me for this?” Jones asked quickly, her eyes glittering.

“No, First Mate. You may resume your duties.”

Jones saluted before storming out of the office.

“What was that all about?” Hal asked.

“Nothing.”

“Sure. Just like nothing’s been bothering you lately.” Hal rolled his eyes, then held up a hand when Caleb opened his mouth to speak. “No—the less I know the better. Following you two around is as exhausting as keeping up with one of those soap opera broadcasts.”



“I just...don’t know if I still love her. If I ever did.”

Hal shook his head. “You do know. You just don’t want to admit it to yourself.”

And for the hundredth time that day, Caleb’s thoughts strayed to Grace. Racing through the storm tunnel with her hand clasped in his. Lying next to her in the treehouse. Watching as she was led away in handcuffs, her hands sticky with blood. Smirking at him from across the platform on Mars 9, across the bar in LA. Like she’d known this was going to happen all along.

*Are you trying to tell me something?* Caleb thought, remembering their meeting at the bar. The way the walls behind her eyes had fallen away, just for a moment.

*“I don’t know what to do.”*

He’d been surrendered, fully at her mercy. She could have used the poison in the glass to kill him, but she’d chosen to incapacitate him instead. Why?

Grace could have blown up the entire palace, including Cloakial and the major players of the Plutonian government. She could have blown up Caleb and most of his crew. Struck a blow for the Rebellion, and ensured that she wouldn’t be a hunted woman for a long time.

Caleb rubbed a hand over his eyes. She was a pirate. Pirates didn’t have moral compasses. That was just a lie from their own propaganda, disseminated whenever they could hack the Republic’s live feed.

Could they say the same about sailors?

Caleb reached in the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a thin, rod-like device. He passed it over the wounds on his arms, sighing in relief as the skin started to knit back together.

To distract himself from the itching, Caleb addressed Hal. “Our orders are to start tracking Granuaile. We get rid of her, we get the Admiral’s favor back.”

“She hasn’t been sighted in a while,” Hal said. “I checked with all the major spy networks. She disappears. It’s kind of her thing.”

“Well, if we don’t know where she is, then we have to figure out where she’s going to be.”

Hal tipped his head to the side. “I’m not following.”

“Granauile might be part of the rebellion, but she’s also a pirate. And what are pirates incapable of resisting above all else?”

“Um...diamonds? The opportunity to light something on fire? Showers?”

Caleb grinned. “Weapons.”

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### ***The Navigator***

Grace and Salt crept into the storage room of *The Navigator*, pressing at the buttons on their propulsion suits so that the bulky protection against the vacuum of space fell away.

“I still think we should just take her out,” Salt said, kicking his suit behind a crate and swinging his arms back and forth to stretch them. “She’s so annoying, always flipping that hair around, talking about how she’s the *rightful heir to the galaxy*, and wearing those *jackets*. ” Salt snorted. “She thinks she’s *sooo* special.”

“She’s the Queen of the Rebellion. You’re talking about treason.”

“Treason is in the eye of the beholder,” Salt said. “Imagine it:” he held his hand up like he was painting the image on a screen. “We form our own government: The O’Malley Clan. Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

Grace rolled her eyes. “Let’s just get this over with. The sooner we get these weapons back to the queen, the sooner I get as far away from this solar system as possible.”

“I figured you wanted to stay in case the *Burnsides* decided to show up.”

Grace pretended to read the packaging on a crate so that he couldn’t read her expression.

“What’s that have to do with anything?”

“Just that I thought you were having fun yanking Captain Lewis all over the galaxy. Must be awful for the rising star of the Republic to get his ass handed to him every day by a *pirate*.”

“Shut up.” Grace said. “Ca—Captain Lewis is assigned to us. That’s why we keep running into each other.”

“Then why did you suddenly decide to have a summit? You wanted to get up close and knock him out? Instead of doing it from a distance?”

“I’m the captain. That’s none of your business.”

“Of course not.” Salt said, yanking open one of the crates. “I’d hate to question your illustrious ruling. You know, you and Queen Elizabeth *are* a lot alike. You’re both—*whoa*.” Salt stopped midsentence, gazing in awe at the contents of the box.

He withdrew an oblong metal object with a blossom like a star at one end. It pulsed with bright orange energy. “I think I’m gonna cry,” he said.

“No.”

“But—”

“Absolutely not. That goes off on the ship, we’re all dead.”

“Give me a break. I know what I’m doing. Look,” he started to press the button, and Grace grabbed his arm.

Salt laughed, letting her wrench his hand away so that the bazooka fell to the floor. “The safety was one. You’re so paranoid.”

“I’m trying to keep us alive!”

Salt picked up the bazooka, cradling it lovingly before throwing it back in the crate.

“Something’s wrong. I know it is. Dom’s crying all the time, Jethren won’t tell anyone what’s going on, and you’re scheduling truce meetings with the *son* of our *archnemesis*.”

“Technically, Lee is our archnemesis—”

“Stop.” Salt said, his mechanical eye whirring to fix on Grace. “If you don’t figure out what your problem is soon, we’re all gonna get killed. He sat on top of the box, patting the space beside him. “I’m not leaving until you tell me.”

“I can’t—” Grace shook her head. “We need to figure out what’s in these crates.”

Salt’s eye whirled. “Guns. A lot of them. The best ones are in this box.” He patted it again. “Sit.”

“We really don’t have time for this.” Grace plopped down beside him.

“Grace,” Salt said. “You saved my life. There is nothing you could tell me that would make me hate you. I would follow you anywhere.”

Grace took a deep breath. She opened her mouth to say something—

And the door burst open, uniformed sailors rushing in, their weapons drawn. One of them fired, and Grace and Salt ducked as sparks erupted behind them.

“It was a trap!” Salt shouted. “I *knew* it!” He said something else, but his words were muffled as Grace yanked him under better cover. Salt pulled something from his waist and tossed it over the crate. There was a scream, and then a flash of light.

“Stun grenade.” Salt said to Grace’s questioning glance, then winced as the blaster fire resumed. “Not as effective as I’d hoped.”

Grace spoke into the comm on her wrist. “Dom! We’ve got company.”

“I told you this was a trap!” Dominya said.

“Thanks!” Grace activated her sword, carving a hole in the side of the metal crate. She reached through the molten metal, wincing at the heat long enough to grab a blaster and fire it around the side of the crate. “Can everyone save their ‘I-was-right’ speech until later?” She ducked.

Salt had obtained a weapon that looked like a bright orange bird while she’d been occupied. As she watched, he leaned out over the edge and fired.

There was a *whomp*, and then silence, accompanied by the smell of smoke.

Salt peeked out over the edge, then stepped into the open. “Awesome.”

There was a massive crater where most of the sailors had been. A few still smoldered off to the side, groaning in pain, but Grace figured they’d be down for a while.

“Wow.” Salt said, looking at the weapon. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Grace tossed her blaster aside and leapt over the crate. “Let’s go before they wake up.”

They crept through the room, tiptoeing around the silhouettes of the fallen sailors.

And Grace knew she shouldn’t feel relief, that one of them wasn’t—that he wasn’t---

“Surface cargo transport to your right.” Dom said. “100 yards. It already has our coordinates set.”

“Okay.” Grace said. She turned off her communicator. “Salt, I want you to go without me—”

“What? Are you insane?”

“There’s something I need to do here.” Grace said. “Just wait for me back at—”

“No way.”

“That’s an order, Salt.”

“Then I guess I’m mutinying, because I won’t leave you to sacrifice yourself.”

Grace looked down. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Of course not.” Salt said. “But I’m not leaving without you.” He held up the weapon.  
“Try and stop me.”

He’d barely finished speaking before a ray of blaster fire caught him in the shoulder, sending him spinning to the floor.

Grace turned, her sword at the ready, already knowing what she’d find.

“Captain.” She said. “Sending the pawns in first.”

“They figure out all the traps that way. You could learn from me.”

“Oh, like I didn’t know this was a trap.” Grace rolled her eyes. “Maybe I just really wanted a—” she glanced over at the weapon that had fallen from Salt’s grasp—“fire launcher”?”

Caleb’s lips curled into an icy smirk. “Maybe you missed me.”

“Not likely.”

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“Not likely.”

Caleb’s hand strayed to his saber, while his blaster remained fixed on her.

He could see the scars from the burns on his wrist, hear Lee’s cold disappointment, feel his father’s glare. *Do not disappoint us again.*

And he knew he didn’t have a choice, no matter what his conscience sang.

He could not live if Granuaile was not dead.

There was a flash of purple, and his phaser fell in two pieces, his fingers miraculously unscathed. Granuaile raised her brilliant sword, relaxing into a stance so natural, it almost looked lazy.

Caleb drew his cutlass and lunged.

She batted his strike aside easily.

She'd been so much better than him when they'd first fought, but he'd trained harder than any captain before him. He knew her techniques, her feints, the way she used her athleticism to her advantage.

He knew Granuaile better than he knew any opponent.

And right now, that's all she was.

An opponent. A criminal, who needed to be brought to justice.

In the fight, he could forget about who she was. He could forget about Plutropolis, and the conflict warring in him. .

He couldn't help but smile as he raised his sword to meet hers, the blade zinging against the purple plasma. "You're not getting away this time," Caleb said. "I have your crew surrounded."

Grace smirked. "That's what you say every time."

"I'm going to catch you, Grace," Caleb said, and her name broke the moment like a pin into a bubble. He froze, his eyes searching hers.

And she whirled and struck again, and it was all he could to do keep her at bay as she advanced.

And the sudden hesitation her name had left him as he uttered it, the awareness of who she was, that she'd never be just anyone to him, was pushed out again by the ferocity of her attack. Maybe Caleb didn't want to kill her, but she wanted to kill him.

*If you don't kill her, you die.*

He came at her in a fury, and he could hear by the harshness of her breathing that she'd never expected this from him—this ferocity.

Caleb raced forward, cutting and slashing with all his considerable strength, ducking and parrying.

Some part of him realized that he was forcing her back, toward the end of the hallway and the flash of space that was beyond it, that he was winning, pushing out the part of him that thought about the way he said her name, the way it dangled off of his lips like a secret. The way he felt so *wrong*, going after her like this. Like he was pulling his own skin off.

And Caleb wasn't even angry, he was something else. He was bursting, for the boy sitting in that tree house under the stars, and the man watching a slave get shot in the head, and this girl, laying down next to him and tracing the path of an imaginary ship in the sky, this girl, saying "Until next time" as she jumped off a platform into the sky, this woman, a snarl on her face as she fended off his attack.

Caleb brought his saber down in a vicious chop at her head, and Grace brought hers up to meet it.

BANG.

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Grace was suddenly aware that she was on the ground, staring mindlessly up at the pewter ceiling of the station. The carpet scratched against her neck.

Miraculously, her sword was still in her hand.

Then Grace felt, as if from far away, a burning sensation in her sword hand. She looked down to see one of her fingers blistering from its contact with the blade.

With a jolt of horror, Grace did the one thing she'd sworn to Jax she'd never do.

She let the weapon fall from her hand.

It hissed as it fell, as though in anger, and Grace immediately reached for it.



But the awareness of the pain made it worse, and she drew her hand into her chest, cradling it against her. All of her fingers had been burned, and they wouldn't bend.

Gritting her teeth, Grace reached forward with her opposite hand, wincing as her injured one brushed against her chest, and picked up the sword.

It was then that Grace heard a groan of pain.

She looked up to see Caleb, in a similar pose, slumped against the wall.

His face was blackened with soot, but he seemed unhurt. He groped on the ground beside him, and Grace realized he was trying to find his cutlass.

She got to her feet and held her sword out in front of her, on trembling legs.

She knew she wouldn't hold out for long against him. Grace wasn't nearly as adept with her left hand.

And the way Caleb had fought today. Like he was *angry*. Like he was trying to get something out of himself...

Grace knew she didn't stand a chance.

"Ready for round 2?" she coughed.

Caleb used the wall to help him get to his feet. He walked toward her, breathing harshly, until they stood, just as they had been before. He didn't raise his sword from its position at his side, but Grace didn't attack, even though this might be her only chance—

His eyes met hers. Glaringly blue in his blackened face.

There was something more in them, too. All of that rage and anger. All that power and energy was—gone.

And what was left? What was staring out at her, that was so familiar? So terrifying and alluring all at once?

Grace shivered, and something inside her chest stopped. Something seized up, to see him before her like this.

She let out a choked breath, but she didn't move. Couldn't.

He was Captain Caleb Lewis, of the *Burnsides*. He was going to capture her, and turn her over to the Admiral. He would kill her now, if she let him.

Caleb looked at her, then at her sword.

Before she could move, before she could think, he'd knocked her sword aside, so that it clattered from her hand onto the floor.

It was the second time she'd been disarmed in her entire life.

And then Caleb let his own cutlass clatter to the floor.

Disarmed.

"Caleb—" she said softly.

And just like that, she was in his arms. Her head on his shoulder, nestled against his chest. She could feel his heart, beating rapidly against her ear.

Just like that.

Caleb let out a sigh as he held her, a sigh that felt as though he'd been holding it in for years. His breath stirred her hair, and she felt his chest expand as he inhaled. Breathing her in. Sweat and gunpowder and smoke and skin.

"Grace."

She pushed her head deeper into his chest, as the alarms blared and the room shook, not caring about the weapons crates, not caring about the sailors or the Republic or the goddamned Rebellion.

She didn't care about anything else, because she was home.

“I missed you,” she whispered.

She didn’t know how long they stood like that. It could have been hours. It could have been seconds. Later, Grace would feel like some part of her was still standing there, smelling of smoke and fire, listening to the beat of his heart as the world burned down around them.

But suddenly, Grace heard the thunder of approaching footsteps, and some part of her, the part that had never allowed herself to truly relax since that last day on Earth, pushed Caleb out of her arms.

“Sailors.” Grace said, just as they rushed in. She backhanded Caleb across the face, and he fell, blood spurting from a split lip.

A sailor with dark, braided hair rushed at her with a shout, and Grace dove for her sword, coming up on her knees just in time to block the attack. She got to her feet, parrying the other woman’s attack, but she knew it was useless. She was using her weaker hand, and the woman was too fast.

And then someone grabbed her by the waist and threw her over their shoulder, towing her back down the hallway.

The sailor woman gave chase, but Dominya was a Hidari, twice her height and twice as fast.

“What—”

“Shut up.” Dominya said gruffly, her strength giving her no issue with Grace’s weight.

Grace opened her mouth to say something else, just as Dominya made a sharp turn, and the wall rushed up to meet her—

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Caleb awoke to find Jones hovering over him, worry creating that perfect less-than sign between her eyebrows. “What the Hell are you doing?”

“Gra—Granuale.” Caleb croaked. He touched his lip. “She—”

“Got away.” Jones said. “What the Hell were you *doing*?”

“Trying to kill her.”

“Really?”

Caleb sat up, his head spinning. He was in the infirmary, electrodes attached to his head and chest, the rhythm of his heartbeat beeping comfortingly.

“Did you capture her? Where is she?”

Jones bit her lip. “You’re not going to tell me what that was?”

“It’s none of your business how I apprehend the enemy.”

That same expression of hurt passed over Jones’ features again. “I’m so sorry, Captain. How could I have not grasped your brilliant master plan?”

“You know what happens if we don’t get her. You know what that means.”

“Apparently, *you* don’t. Admiral Lee is probably on his way to us right now, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“What?”

“She got away. Again.”

Caleb ran a hand through his hair. “Shit.”

“Yeah, it’s a good thing I came when I did—”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, if I hadn’t, you’d be dead, and I wouldn’t have picked him up—”

“What?” Caleb wondered if the blow had affected his mind. “Picked *who* up?”

Jones' grin nearly took up her entire face. "Come with me."

They arrived on the deck of the *Burnsides* to a crowd. The entire crew seemed to be in a circle around something, jeering and cursing. Caleb heard the thud of a blow, and he and Jones rushed forward. "Stop! Stop right now! What's going on?"

Realizing their captain and first mate were present, the crew shrank back.

To reveal a sandy-haired young man, clad in a black armored shirt, black jeans, and black boots, kneeling on the ground.

As Caleb approached, he spat blood, then raised his head to face them. He had a golden eye, whirring and clicking as it took in its surroundings.

When it caught on Caleb, it stilled, and both of his of his eyes, gold and blue, narrowed. He fell into a mocking half-bow. "Captain Lewis," the man said. "I'm honored."

"Salt Samur." Jones gestured to the man with disdain. "Son of Deserter Jax Samur, weapons and martial arts expert. Crewmember of the *Sea Queen*. And," she leaned in so that the rest of the crew couldn't hear. "Granuaile's boyfriend, I'm told."

The deck heaved under Caleb's feet, and he was happy that Jones was too focused on the prisoner to notice his reaction.

Salt's eyes, however, flicked up and down Caleb's body. He smirked.

Jones crouched down until she was at his eye-level, pulling out her dagger and running it along his chin. "I wonder what Granuaile will give up to get *you* back in one piece."

But Salt just ignored her, not breaking eye contact with Caleb. His grin widened. "You have no idea."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE ESCAPE

**August 9, 2051**

**Lawrence, Kansas**

**Earth**

Grace stared at the body. The sirens wailed, and tires crunched over gravel as the police approached. And she knew that she needed to run. But she couldn't move.

Electric shocks spasmed through her limbs, and her stomach twisted like she might throw up.

And there Anders lay, her red hair spread out like a fan across the gravel. Blood pooled darkly beneath the single streetlight. Grace couldn't tell if the choking, rasping noises coming from the chief were the last gasps of the dying or an indication that she still lived.

Grace wasn't sure which outcome she wanted.

Blood lapped at the edges of her sneakers. So much blood—was this how much one person had in their body? Was this what Grace would have looked like, if she had been slower? Would she be less afraid, if she were lying there?

Would she be with her parents?

Grace wiped the tears from her eyes, taking great, heaving breaths. Somehow, the purging had helped her to move again. Red and blue lights flashed against the concrete wall in front of her. But just over it, a field of tall grass beckoned.

By the time the police arrived, there was nothing but a pool of blood, a puddle of vomit, and the imprint of Grace's sneakers.

### **Six hours earlier**

Grace trudged through her front door, nudging it open with her foot. Her phone beeped as she did so, and she knew what it was going to say.

*Grace, did you leave the door open again? People know where we live. We have a lot of enemies.*

Grace rolled her eyes. She lived next door to the family of the Commander of the entire Navy. Criminals weren't *that* stupid.

She swung the door open and swept into the hallway, dialing on her phone as she did so. "Can I come over?" she asked, as soon as the other person picked up. "I need to get out of my house."

"Sure." Caleb said. "You know where to find me."

A few minutes later, she was climbing up the ladder to the treehouse. Caleb was already there, typing some commands into his computer, which projected a battlefield onto the wall in front of him.

Grace studied the figures for a moment. "Battle of Mars? 2030?"

Caleb nodded. "Dad wanted me to make sure I knew all of it, for—" he stopped.

"For when you go." Grace looked down at the floor.

"I won't go."

"What? Are you insane?"

"I can't believe they didn't take you. Your test scores were better than mine, better than everyone's!"

Grace put her backpack on the floor. “I know.”

“I even told Dad to pull some strings—”

“I told you not to do that!”

“Well, I did. He shouldn’t even need to. Your parents are detectives, you’re the best in our grade, it just makes sense—”

“It doesn’t make sense!” Grace kicked her backpack, then winced as she felt her toe connect with the spine of one of her textbooks. She hated that he was making her bring this up, making her say it out loud. “I didn’t get in. I wasn’t—”

Caleb cut her off before she could say it, not even allowing the possibility. “There’s no way they’ll keep you out if they know it will keep me out, too.”

“No.”

“Come on! Let me help you!”

“I won’t get in just because of who you are.” Grace said. “That’s worse than not getting in.”

“Come on, Grace—”

“No.” She glared at him, and he turned his gaze back to his screen. “Fine.”

Grace walked over to sit beside him, her hip pressing against his. When they were younger, she would have laid her head on his shoulder without thinking about it, but things were different.

It wasn’t just that she hadn’t gotten into the Academy. This had been going on for a couple of years. Since that night when she’d kissed him after they’d escaped from the storm tunnels.



There was an awkwardness between them that hadn't been there before. They still never talked about the kiss. Afterward, they had picked their way around each other like skittish animals. It had taken months for them to start acting normal again.

And even though most of that awkwardness had faded away, things were—changing—between them.

Grace was starting to notice things about the other girls and boys in school that she usually didn't. The way girls' hips swayed when they walked, and the way they'd toss their hair so that it caught the light. The way some of the boys had grown over the summer, outward as well as upward, their arms and shoulders full of muscles that flexed and slid beneath their skin.

It was a thousand times worse with Caleb.

Grace noticed everything. The way his hair swept across his forehead. The way his eyes changed colors depending on his mood, turning from a light, clear blue to nearly a green.

The way his shoulder had become harder, all angles as she set herself against it. How he always smelled like freshly baked cookies.

Grace took a deep breath and sat against the wall, trying to shove the thoughts out of her head.

"So what's your plan?" She asked.

"Pincer movement." Caleb said. "We go in from two sides, here and here." He showed her where the corresponding places glowed on the screen. "Then we go straight up the middle, to take down the Martian command ship."

"Huh."

"What do you mean, huh? That's the way they did it!"

“That’s the way *your dad* did it.” Grace said. “But what about—” she swiped, and the fleet of Martians dove, hammering up at the Navy’s ships from beneath. The large, cumbersome destroyers didn’t stand a chance in such a tight space. The Martians destroyed them, and Caleb’s screen flashed red. FAILED.

“But that didn’t happen.”

“Just because the Martian president was a moron doesn’t mean they all are.” Grace said. “Here. Start it over.”

Caleb did as she asked, and soon the specs for the battle rose up on the screen again. Grace frowned, letting her mind drift. She always did better with this when she wasn’t thinking about it directly, when she could see the battlefield at the corners of her vision, its structure something she could walk inside and poke around in.

Her mother had taught her to wait for the answer to come, not to dash into the middle of a firefight with nothing but a training manual on your side.

“The person who wins is the person with the killing calm.” She said. “You know how many tight spots I’ve been in, pinned down and unable to fire back? I kept my head. I waited. I saw the whole picture.”

Grace raised an eyebrow. “And where was Dad?”

“Sprinting into the firefight with nothing but three rounds and a whole lot of rage,” her father said, flexing his biceps.

“Idiot.” Grace’s mother said, and kissed him.

Grace typed a few commands into the screen. As Caleb watched, the Martian ships lit up, exploding one by one.

When it was done, half the Martian ships had disappeared.

“What did you do?” Caleb asked, as the remaining Martian ships were rent apart under the onslaught of the Navy.

Grace shrugged.

“Come on, Grace!” Caleb moaned. “Tell me.”

Grace tapped a few commands on the screen, so that her history pulled up.

“A reactor to eat at their shields, fired as a warning shot.” Caleb read, as the screen showed the deterioration of one ship in slow motion. “But how did you know we *had* one of those?”

“I talked to Mr. Yorick about it after class the other day.”

“Of course you did,” Caleb pressed fast forward so that the fleet disintegrated again. He tapped a few keys, and the screen went blank. “I’m bored. Let’s do something.”

“Sure, just as soon as—” she stopped as her phone started vibrating in her pocket, its humming incessant. “Ugh. Hang on.” She answered the call. “What?”

“You need to get back home, right now.” Her father’s voice was soft and hurried. “Right now, Gracie.”

“Dad? What are you—”

“Listen to me—listen.” Grace heard what sounded like the revving of an engine. “I’m on my way to get you. Pack for a few weeks.”

A few weeks? “Dad—”

“Some things are going on at work right now, and I need to make sure you’re safe. So we’re going away.”

“Where’s Mom?”

There was a long pause, and Grace felt it in her chest before she knew what it was. “I’ll tell you when I get there, Sweetheart. Just be ready.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t tell Caleb where we’re going.”

“But Dad—”

“Don’t!” her father’s voice snapped the way it did when he was angry, and Grace knew it would be useless to argue.

She hung up and clambered down the ladder

Caleb’s face popped out over the hole above her, “What’s going on?”

“I have to go!” Grace called, trying to sound as lighthearted as possible. She didn’t hear his reply before she dashed through her back door.

It was odd. The house had never bothered her before. Same white walls, same spotless countertops, same stainless steel appliances.

But now it felt—sinister. Worrying.

Her hands shook as she walked, barely daring to make a sound on the tile. Her father had sounded *worried* on the phone. He was never worried. “Detectives don’t worry,” her parents always said. “They just figure it out.”

So what was going on?

Grace had left the door to her room ajar this morning; a shaft of yellow light spilled into the hallway. She tiptoed through it and slammed the door, locking it behind her.

Her room looked the same. Small, but bright. A flowery comforter and a million little sailor action figures, along with her Playstation 10 and giant projector screen. Grace hurried to the drawers, pulling out her clothes and throwing them into her backpack.

She was in the middle of deciding whether to bring a jacket when a knock sounded on her window.

Ice crept across her chest. She took a deep breath to thaw herself out and walked to the window, twitching the blinds aside to see—

“Why didn’t you just use the front door?” Grace opened the window as her father clambered in. “What’s going on?”

Grace’s father looked even more antsy now, his jaw quivering, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. “You got everything?” He started to pace the room, wiping his hands on his jeans as he did so.

“Dad—” A terrible feeling rushed through Grace as she beheld the orange brown stains on her father’s jeans. “Is that *blood*?”

Her father ignored her. “I’m gonna grab a few things and we’ll head out.”

“What. Is going. On.”

“From now on, you don’t go anywhere without me.”

“Where’s Mom?” Grace finally shouted the last question, furious that he wasn’t answering her directly, terrified at what it might mean.

Her father finally looked at her, his deep brown eyes focusing on hers. “No,” Grace whispered. “No.” She was sobbing before she knew what she was doing, sinking to her knees as her worst fears were realized.

And then her father's arms were around her, letting her rest her head on his shoulder. "I know, Sweetheart. I'm so sorry."

"She wasn't supposed to die! She was careful! She *promised!*"

"I know."

Grace sobbed harder, and her father's arms tightened, then let go. "We have to go right now."

Grace took several deep breaths and got to her feet. "Why?"

Her father gave her a long look. Then, as though ridding himself of a poison, he spat. "Your mother was killed by Chief Anders."

"What?" Grace had met Chief Anders, liked her even. Anders liked to tell jokes, using funny voices to represent people she'd met on the job. And she had the most devastating green eyes.

"What did—"

"I'm sorry, Gracie but we can't talk about this now!" Her father said. "We have to go!"

Grace shook her head, but before she could speak, someone burst through her bedroom door, tackling her father to the ground.

Grace screamed, and a gloved hand clamped over her mouth. She bit down, and the hand went away, someone cursing in her ear.

"Run!" her father shouted, just as someone kicked him in the head, and his nose broke, blood spurting everywhere.

Grace didn't have to be told twice. She started for the window, but another hand wrapped around her neck, squeezing and wrenching her head back so hard, she felt her neck pop.

“St—“ Grace tried to speak, but the hand was crushing her windpipe. She scrambled behind her, trying to find a way to kick out, but black spots were already dancing across her vision. Her legs went weak.

“Monson!” a clear, female voice said. “Back off. She’s just a kid.”

The gloved hand relaxed, at the same time as more hands closed on Grace, wrenching her arms behind her and pulling her out of the room.

Her father was limp on the ground, unconscious, blood pooling around his head. “Dad!” Grace struggled, but the police officers were too strong for her.

Tears sprang to her eyes again, and she screamed. “Dad! Please!”

“Take them back to the station,” Anders ordered.

“He needs an ambulance,” one of the cops said. “He’s bleeding pretty bad. Lance—” The officer bent down to check for a pulse, and her father groaned in reply.

“Know what?” Anders said. “Get back.” She pulled out her pistol, and the officer darted away just as she fired, and an explosion of red blossoming on Grace’s father’s chest.

Grace screamed even louder, her voice choking off at the end in shock. She twisted in the officer’s grip, finally succeeding in bending one of his fingers back so he released her, swearing.

As Grace knelt by her father’s body, she dimly heard Anders say. “Fine. One minute.”

Her father was still alive, his skin already turning pale, blood pooling around his body. Grace was kneeling in it. She touched his cheek, and he turned his head to look at her. He tried to smile, but it was ruined by the blood leaking out of his mouth. “Gracie,” he said. “The Docks.”

“What? Dad. Dad come on, you’ll be fine. Just—just hang on, Dad. *Please.*” Grace reached for her father’s hand, not caring that it was soaked in blood. She pressed down on the wound in his chest, her tears mingling with the blood that soaked through her fingers. “Someone

help me, PLEASE!” she shouted, turning for a moment to look at Anders and the other cops. “Do something!”

But they all just watched her, their expressions grim. One of them, the officer who had checked her father’s pulse, just shook his head. Grace turned back to her father.

His face had gone slack, and his lips were nearly white.

Someone’s hands grabbed her again, holding her back tightly as the officer knelt down and felt for his pulse again. He nodded after a moment. “He’s dead.” The officer closed her father’s eyes.

“Don’t know why you’re doing that,” Anders said.

“He was my training officer.” The officer said, still looking at his face. “I never expected—”

“Don’t know why you didn’t.” Anders’ voice was cold and hard. “People like them were never meant for our side of the law. Let’s go.”

The officer grabbed Grace by the back of the shirt and pulled her out of the room. Grace went with him willingly this time, numb. Her fingers sticky with blood.

\*\*\*

Caleb watched as the squad cars arrived at Grace’s house. He heard the sharp sound of the gunshot, cutting through the night.

He heard Grace screaming, screaming as though she was in unendurable pain.

Caleb wanted to go to her, but his mother had come into his treehouse not long after Grace had left, pulling him into the living room.

“Caleb,” she said. “I need to tell you something.”



Caleb stiffened, not liking the tone in her voice. It was the same tone she used whenever his dad went on a dangerous mission. Calm, but guarded. Waiting for his reaction.

“Grace’s mother died in a shootout with police this afternoon.”

“With the police?” Caleb repeated, confused. “But Detective O’Malley—”

“Was working for pirates. Smuggling drugs and weapons to their ships from the evidence lockers. There is evidence to suggest--” his mother seemed to struggle for a moment, then went on. “That both she and her husband were spies for the Rebellion.”

Caleb shook his head in disbelief, but his mother went on. “They’re about to go arrest Grace’s father, and I don’t want you going over there.”

“But Grace—”

“Will be just fine.” His mother finished. “If she doesn’t know anything.”

“She doesn’t!” Caleb protested. “Grace wants to be a *sailor*! She’s wanted it her whole life!”

“She wanted to be one, but she didn’t make it into the Academy.”

“So?”

“Oh, honey. Why do you think she didn’t get in? We’ve been watching them. People like the O’Malleys—let’s just say I’m not surprised.”

Caleb shook his head. “She would *never*. ”

His mother’s mouth was a set, grim line. “Sometimes people aren’t who we think, Caleb. I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

\*\*\*

It took Grace a few minutes to realize that the police car wasn’t heading towards the station.

She didn't say anything at first. Her skin felt cold, her hands clammy and sticky. She kept playing the last moments of her father's life over and over in her head.

"*Gracie*," Blood bubbling up from his lips, pooling all around his body. So much blood, and he was getting paler and paler as it rushed out of him, his lips nearly white. "The Docks."

But why would her father tell her to go to the Docks? The Docks were where pirates came in, everyone knew that. They anchored up in the huge airfield, right next to the commercial vessels rich people took on weekend trips to the Moon. Grace's family couldn't afford its own vessel, and her parents hated the docks anyway. "Everyone just looks the other way," Grace's mother used to say, wrinkling her nose. "It's disgusting."

Grace's parents couldn't be pirates. They'd been loyal to the Republic her whole life, encouraged her to apply to the Academy. Her best friend was the son of the Commander.

They wouldn't betray her like this.

But Anders had killed her father, just like that. Fired on him because she didn't want to deal with an ambulance. Because it was *inconvenient*.

Grace's stomach turned, and she retched, but nothing came out.

Anders turned around in her driver's seat, fixing Grace with a glare. "Don't throw up in my car."

"Why? Are you gonna shoot me?" Grace was surprised at how level and calm her voice sounded. *The killing calm*, she thought. Anders hadn't even bothered with restraints. She clearly didn't think Grace was a threat.

"Of course I'm not gonna shoot you," the chief turned away from Grace with a flip of her hair. "I would never shoot someone who didn't deserve it."

Grace choked. "My dad—"

“Deserved it. Do you know how much this department has lost because of him? How much evidence, how many criminals he has let slip through our fingers? What he’s given to Captain Paladin and *The Sea Queen* alone...”

Grace shook her head, trying to focus on the air vent in front of her. She’d read before that focusing on a single object made it easier to stop crying.

And she couldn’t cry right now. She had to focus. “My parents were good cops.”

Anders’ reply offered no mercy. “Your parents were scum. Might as well accept it, kid.”

Grace’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t answer.

They definitely weren’t heading toward the precinct. Grace hadn’t seen anything but residential houses and long stretches of Kansas grass for miles. There weren’t even streetlights in the area, except for a few intermittent ones that loomed out of the growing dark like tiny little beacons.

Looking up through the window, Grace saw a ship trace a sparked path across the steadily darkening sky, trailing orange and blue light.

She gulped. *The Docks.*

Her hand tightened on her seatbelt, and she eyed the weapon in Anders’ holster. *The killing calm. The Docks. Gracie.*

Anders turned onto a gravel road, the car bumping along as it ventured through potholes and depressions in the ground.

Up ahead, Grace could see what looked like a construction site. All gravel, dirt, and a yellow Bulldozer looming up from beneath a streetlamp that glowed white in the night.

*She's going to kill me, Grace thought. She's going to take me out here and shoot me. She'll say it was self-defense. And if the police chief wants to kill me, the police aren't safe. And the Navy aren't safe.*

Grace's hands curled into fists. *These will not be the last moments of my life.*

Finally, the car rolled to a stop, and Grace bolted, rushing out of the car before Anders had time to say anything.

She raced into the site, crouching down behind the Bulldozer as she heard Anders slam the car door.

"What the Hell is wrong with you?" Anders shouted. "Get back in the car!"

Grace didn't move.

She heard the sound of Anders' gun being pulled out of its holster.

"Fine." Anders said, in the same tone of voice she'd used before she'd shot Grace's father. "I didn't want you to go out like this, but whatever. Your parents were rebels, kid. Feeding information to Queen Elizabeth and the whole damn pirate enterprise. Stealing evidence, doctoring investigation reports. They were dirty cops. And you know what they say about dirty cops—"

"It runs in families—" Grace whispered.

Anders crept forward, still talking. "Given the way you've acted today, there's no way to prove you aren't part of the whole thing. Innocent people don't run."

"Besides," Anders went on. "This is a lot less paperwork." She rounded the corner of the bulldozer, to find—

Nothing.

In that moment of confusion, Grace dropped on top of Anders, launching herself from atop the bulldozer.

Grace screamed as she landed, knees first, the blow snapping Anders' head back and carrying them both to the ground.

Grace knew she'd only have a few seconds to strike. She brought down the brick in her hand with all her might.

At the same time, a shot rang out through the night.

Grace screamed, even as Anders slumped against her.

Grace closed her eyes, afraid to look. Afraid not to.

Finally, she opened them.

Anders lay on the ground, her mouth eyes shut, her mouth slack. Blood as dark as her father's pooled on the ground beneath her.

\*\*\*

"Caleb," his mother's voice was soft and gentle. "I need you to come into the living room."

Caleb stretched, then sat bolt upright. The memories of the day flew behind his eyes. Sitting with Grace in the treehouse, feeling her gaze on him, wishing it was more. An officer shoving Grace into a police car, her hands sticky with blood.

"Is it Grace? What happened?"

"Come into the living room," his mother said again, then left.

Caleb rushed into the living room, then stopped in his tracks.

"Dad?"

His father was sitting in one of the armchairs, still in his dress uniform. "Sit down."

Caleb sat, watching his father warily. “What’s going on? Is this still about Grace?”

His mother murmured something to his father, and Commander Lewis waved his hand.

“He needs to answer, even if only as a formality.”

“Arthur—she was his best friend.”

“Was?” Caleb interrupted. “*Was?*”

“Did you know anything about it?” his father asked, his blue eyes fixed on his son’s.

“You’re not in trouble, but you need to tell me. Otherwise, there’s no way I can fix it.”

“Know anything about what?”

“That your friend was a filthy, lowlife pirate!” his father hissed. “Did she tell you?”

“NO!” Caleb shouted, too shocked to discipline himself. “She wasn’t! She wanted to be a sailor. She wanted to fight for justice, just like—”

“It’s okay.” His father said, as Caleb’s face fell. “They fooled your mother. They fooled us all.”

“What’s going to happen to them?” Caleb asked. “Will they go to prison?”

His mother sat by his side, taking his hand. She and his father shared a long look, and his father nodded.

“Sweetie, Grace—she attacked Chief Anders. Anders is okay, but in the struggle,” his mother took a deep breath. “Grace was shot. They found her in the field a couple hundred yards away. She bled to death.”

“Grace? Take on Chief Anders?” Caleb could barely even form the questions. His head was spinning. He felt like he was falling, falling through the Earth, unanchored and helpless.

His mother nodded.

“You—you said Grace was—”

“Killed.” His father interrupted. “I’m sorry.” But he didn’t sound sorry at all. He sounded irritated, and disappointed. Like Caleb should have known better than to have a friend like this.

Caleb bowed his head so his father wouldn’t see the tears springing to his eyes. “I see.”

His mother rubbed his back, but Caleb flinched away from her. “I’d like—I’d like to go back to bed now.” He raised his head, willing himself to keep his tears back, and faced his father. “Is that okay?”

His father nodded, and Caleb bolted. He could still hear the murmur of his mother’s voice as he shut his bedroom door, and his father’s “What was I supposed to do, Anita?” But he didn’t care.

He flung himself into his bed, stuffing his knuckles into his mouth to quiet his sobs as the tears came.

Grace, a tooth missing, daring him to take her on in a game of basketball.

Grace’s long fingers, whirring over the keyboard as she showed him another strategy.

Grace’s dark skin, gleaming in the Sun.

Grace, kissing him in the dark.

*Grace.*

Caleb didn’t sleep for the rest of the night.

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The Docks were loud and raucous this time of night, and Grace worried that she’d never sneak onto a vessel. She’d already nearly been caught washing the blood off her hands in the sink of one of the taverns. One of the bartenders, with four limbs and a long, green neck, had warned Grace that if she didn’t leave immediately, she’d call the police.

Grace had stumbled out, apologizing, then sprinted through the crowds meandering along the walkway between the bars.

And that's when she realized how conspicuous her sprinting was. When she ran, everyone turned to look at her.

But she wasn't the only young person here. There were other kids about her age, chattering back and forth over kebabs, posted up at the door to one of the taverns, high-fiving stumbling drunks. Sauntering along alone.

So Grace slowed down, stuffing her hands in her pockets. She kept her eyes in front of her, ignoring the enticing and effusive smells emanating from all sides of the walkway, the leers of the peddlers on either side, selling trinkets from far-off planets or performing for money. She kept her expression neutral and bored, like she knew where she was going.

And she looked, and walked. The airstrip went on for a few miles, and Grace had plenty of time, even if she felt like she didn't. No one would be packing up until morning.

She immediately eliminated the wealthier-looking vessels, the ones locked up against any invaders.

No, she needed someone with the ramp down, allowing its crew members to come and go as they pleased.

A ship that looked like it was too broken down for people to think about stealing it.

A *pirate* ship, so they wouldn't turn her in.

Problem was, Grace had no way of knowing which ships were just full of people looking to party, and which were pirates.

She passed a few junky-looking vessels, cracked solar tiles beneath their shields, but she didn't dare get closer.



How was she supposed to know who could help her?

How was she going to--

*Wait.*

Grace nearly stopped in her tracks as a large, black ship loomed up. It was huge, bigger than any of the ones on either side of it, and it had billowing solar sails springing out from the deck. A huge dome covered the outside of it like a giant fishbowl. Inside, groups of people milled about, some arguing over a set of navigational displays, others huddled around something that smoked, and even more just sprawled all over the deck, drinking and playing cards.

There was a collection of species, almost as many nonhumans as humans. Grace's eyes widened as she saw a Draxian, with its deep green skin and elephantlike snout, stop to talk to a small human woman with pink hair. Next to him, a man with salt-and-pepper hair haggled over a long, thin-bladed cutlass with an alien who looked like a giant grasshopper.

Grace gulped. *Pirates*. She was sure. No ship that looked like that would be a commercial vessel, or some rich kid's splurge.

But what confirmed it was when the Draxian stepped away from the edge of the ship and joined the flow of traffic.

They had revealed the ship's name, emblazoned in blue-green letters on the hull. *The Sea Queen*.

*"What she gave to Paladin and The Sea Queen alone."*

If her parents were pirates, then pirates were all she had.

Grace sauntered through the walkway and onto the deck, trying to appear casual, ducking through the first door she saw.

The door led to a staircase, and Grace rushed down it, keeping her footfalls as light as possible.

The staircase ended, opening up into a wide room with a concrete floor and garage-like doors along the opposite side. The whole room was stacked with barrels and crates, enough to nearly cover the floor, which was as wide as a football field. Grace ducked behind a crate just as the garage door started to rumble open with a squeaking and grinding noise.

As she watched, the pirate with salt and pepper hair hurled a crate into the bay, muttering a few curses as the crate landed with a particularly loud crash. “600 for cleaning, he’s crazy.” He walked toward the staircase.

Grace held her breath as he passed her crate, praying he wouldn’t look too closely. She was sure that her hair was at least visible.

There was a *click*, and the room was plunged into darkness. Grace heard the door slam.

Then, the rattle of the descending garage door filled the room.

And Grace was all alone.

## CHAPTER X

### POMPEII

**April 4, 2054**

#### **City of Ash, Pompeii**

The planet of Pompeii had been named by the humans who discovered it, after the famous volcano that had wiped out an entire civilization on Earth in a matter of hours.

Pompeii was a lush, tropical planet filled with active volcanoes. Eruptions happened daily, and the only way to survive was to either move around according to the cycle of eruptions, or erect a structure that would somehow withstand the heat, ash, and flames.

Naturally, Pompeii didn't seem to have much besides barren stretches of wastelands, interspersed with the trees that thrived in the tropical atmosphere, somehow managing to grow where the fallout from each explosion would barely miss them.

Pompeii was also home to magma lizards that sunned themselves in the crevices where lava flowed, their specially adapted skin making them into tiny little furnaces that allowed them to scorch their prey and the land beneath them.

The status of near-catastrophe that characterized the landscape, the impossibility of mounting an attack on something so volatile and unpredictable, had made Pompeii an excellent holding place for prisoners of the Republic, and a useful avenue for training exercises among final year cadets in the Academy. The Republic's fortress was built deep underground, beneath one of the volcanos, its security the ever-present streams of lava that held off all avenues of access.

The prison had taken the name of Ash City, not only for the rain that characterized the surface, but also the looks of the prisoners and guards that lived on the place year-round. The ash

got into the air and their clothes, staining even the most pristine of uniforms a sickly gray color.

Its own small civilization, Ash City clung to life on Pompeii, its existence a stubborn conquest over the unruly and inaccessible planet.

Anyone would be crazy to attempt to infiltrate the prison.

But Captain Paladin of *The Sea Queen* was crazy.

The deck of the ship was a hive of activity. Paladin stood in front of the seismographic readings of the planet's core, running a hand along his beard. His eyes were sharp sparks of life in the lines and wrinkles of his face, piercing through the layers of skin that surrounded them as the frowned at the screen.

Paladin tapped something on the screen, and a schematic of the most recent eruptions in Ash City appeared. He nodded, as if to confirm something, then swiped across the screen again so that the graph disappeared.

Grace sat across from him, hunched over her sword, which lay deactivated across her lap. There was a particularly irritating bloodstain on the pommel, but she hardly noticed it.

She was watching Paladin as he shrugged his trenchcoat on over the thermal reduction suit Dominya had designed. Watching as he checked the fit of his sword from where it was strapped across his chest. The particular, careful way that Paladin moved through a few motions, wincing as he did so.

But more concerning than Paladin was the way his First Mate, Seaworth, watched him from the edge of the deck. His arms crossed so that his muscles bulged, Seaworth stood with an ease that attested to his youth and prowess. His mustache bristled as he smirked, watching Paladin struggle through basic defense exercises.

“This isn’t going to be like those other times,” a gruff, gravelly voice spoke just above her, and Grace nearly jumped out of her skin to see that Paladin was standing directly over her, “If I don’t make it,”

Grace rolled her eyes. “Tell your mom you’re sorry. Don’t let Seaworth pee all over your furniture.”

Paladin hauled her to her feet. He lowered his voice. “I’m serious, Grace. You’re going to need a lot of help. Jax and Salt will be on your side, and so will Dom and Jethren, but Seaworth has wanted this ship for years.”

“Then why give it to me?”

“Because Seaworth will make us worse than the Republic.”

“Then name me First Mate.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Why? Because Seaworth will try to kill me?” Grace’s eyes locked with Seaworth’s, and her lip curled. “Let him try.”

“Things are more complicated than personal vendettas,” Captain Paladin’s eyes were narrowed with disdain. “I need him. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Grace was about to argue when Dominya arrived, putting her arms around Grace’s waist.

Grace leaned against Dom, sinking into her like a pillow. Dominya’s voice was calm and reassuring as she started double-checking the settings on the suits with Captain Paladin, and for a moment Grace was comforted just by being in her girlfriend’s capable arms.

Nothing could hurt her here. The rage and anger that edged her consciousness dulled in Dominya’s presence, like looking at the world through a blurred lens. Everything came out a little less severe. A little less terrifying.

The feeling was halted when she felt a familiar probe at the edge of her thoughts. *We have a problem.*

Before Grace could answer, Jethren rushed to their little group. His face was flushed, and she could see dampness at his temples. As Grace watched, he started flicking his fingers, crumpling and flexing them so that they popped.

His shirt was crumpled, stuffed haphazardly into the pants that he'd borrowed from Salt. He held his bow staff at this side, but as he spoke, he started to buckle it across his back.

"The volcano's going to explode in a few hours."

Grace raised an eyebrow. "It's a volcanic planet, Jethren."

Jethren shook his head. "It's an unprecedented pattern. The prison will collapse."

"Are they evacuating?" Paladin demanded.

Jethren shook his head, wrinkles appearing next to his eyes as he winced in pain.

"They're shielding the central command. Someone--"

"Another telepath?"

"Yeah." He swallowed, then clenched his jaw. "He's really strong. I can't get in closer."

"Do they know we're coming?"

Jethren squinted. "I can get in the mind of the sailors on the periphery. There's no alarm going off, at least not yet."

"Hang on."

Paladin beckoned to Seaworth, who was still leaning against the one of the generators, glaring at them.

"If you're done brooding," Paladin said. "We have a problem. I thought you said there weren't any telepaths on the base."

“Maybe one of the prisoners is one.” Seaworth shrugged. “How would I know?”

Paladin let out a huff of disgust and turned back to Grace. “You and Jethren hang back, direct from up here.”

“What?”

Paladin’s eyes held that stillness, the gravity that made people follow his orders unquestioningly, that warned against insubordination with the promises of what had happened to those who dared to question him. “You’re rear guard.”

Grace was unfazed. “We’ve never left anyone but Dom for a rear guard before, and you haven’t had a problem with it.”

She felt Dominya’s exasperated sigh stir her hair.

“Do you want to go on leave the next time we go to Andua? Or do you want to be locked in the brig?”

Grace looked down. “No, Captain.”

“Where will you and Jethren be when we make our move?”

“On deck, Captain.”

“If you need to communicate with me, Dominya has brilliantly engineered these communication devices to withstand volcanic activity.”

“Fine.”

“If we are not back in time, you need to help Dominya take off. You’ll all die if you’re here when the volcano erupts.”

Grace’s head snapped up. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

Paladin bent down so that he could whisper. “Granuaile.” He said softly, so that none of the other crew could hear. “You will not sacrifice this ship or this crew to save me.”

And looking at that determination in his dark eyes, Grace knew better than to argue.

Instead, Grace spoke to Jethren. *I have a really bad feeling.*

*Me too.*

She, Jethren and Dominya watched as Paladin, Seaworth, Tabitha, and Jax jumped off the deck, activating their parachutes and descending into the fiery planet.

As soon as they were gone, Jethren turned to Grace. “Please don’t.”

“You don’t have to come.” Grace said, disengaging herself from Dominya.

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you’re not.” Dominya retorted. She stepped between them and the edge of the ship, her hair waving around her.

“Dom,” Grace said, trying out a disarming grin. “I was just wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“You’re disobeying Paladin’s orders.”

“You make it sound like that’s a bad thing.”

“I won’t stand here and watch you get hurt. I won’t.” Her eyes locked with Grace’s, and something inside Grace started to soften.

“Dom,” she said. “Please let me go.”

Dominya’s expression turned thunderous, her hair moving more and more agitatedly around her face.

“I’ll just go check out the seismograph,” Jethren stuffed his hands into his pockets and strolled over to the side of the deck, shooting Grace a sympathetic glance as he did so.

*I know you’re listening in.*

Jethren didn’t respond, but Grace could practically feel his smirk.



Dominya waited until Jethren got to the other side of the deck before continuing. “You aren’t better than any of them. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“I have a really bad feeling, Dom. I have to—”

“Why? What can you do that they can’t?”

“Because—” Grace took her hand out of Dominya’s. “Because I’m strong, and I can, and I haven’t been working all these years to sit on the sidelines while something big happens.”

“Paladin’s right.” Dominya shook her head. “You can’t handle this!”

“When have I ever let someone being *right* stop me?”

“Stop it!” Dominya snapped, her nostrils flaring. Her hair whipped around her head for a moment before she took a few deep breaths. It settled against her shoulders, still quivering. “It’s like you’re trying to get yourself killed. Like you don’t even *care*—”

“Of course I care. Can you imagine how horrible it would be if I had a fiery death? How would I plan my open casket funeral then?”

Grace regretted the words as soon as she said them, because Dominya’s hair sprung out again. She stepped even closer to Grace, so that she was pressed against her. “Stop trying to push me away. You’ve *never* let me in. We’ve been together three years, and Jethren still knows more about you than I do—”

“Well, he can read minds.”

“Enough!” Dominya started to cry, and Grace knew she had gone too far this time. “Why won’t you let me in? Why don’t you love me enough?”

Grace reached up and grabbed Dominya’s chin, running her thumb along her bottom lip. She reached up and swiped at one of the purple tears that fell from her eyes.

Then, as Dominya trembled, Grace sank her hand into her long, white hair. She stood up on her tiptoes to kiss her, winding her fingers through her hair to pull her close.

Grace tried to put everything that she was feeling into the kiss. The regret at not being able to tell Dominya about her life, and what had led her to *The Sea Queen*. The self-destructiveness that chipped away at her self-preservation and made reckless decisions her only outlet.

The apology for not loving her the way she wanted, because she wasn't sure if she could. Because for all the love she held for Dominya, there was a secret part of her heart that might belong to someone else. That might have since she was a child.

Finally, they broke apart. "I need you to take off if we're not back," Grace said quietly, as Dominya pushed a loose strand of hair back from her forehead.

Dominya nodded. "I love you," she said, her eyes making the words cut where they were supposed to comfort. "Not that it matters."

Grace disentangled herself to go to Jethren, who stood on the edge of the deck. He handed her a parachute, and she buckled it on, refusing to meet his eyes.

Once she was secure, she and Jethren stepped onto the very edge, staring at the planet below like it was a death sentence.

"It had to be on Pompeii," Jethren said. "It couldn't be on Baleen or Parallaze. Why do we never have missions on any of the fun planets? Or what about Fiji on Earth? I've heard great things about Fiji."

Grace gestured to the volcanic pit in front of them, where magma reached high enough to spark off the ship's shields, then fell back down. "What? That doesn't look fun to you?"

Grace could feel the exasperated glare Jethren shot her. She took his hand. "Ready?"

Jethren sighed.

Grace splashed through a puddle of foul-smelling sludge, wincing as she felt the damp seep through into her skin. “You know, the last time I was in a tunnel on Earth, I almost died. This is worse.”

“The sewers aren’t the most direct way to central command, but I still think they’re a safer bet than going the way the captain went in.” Jethren said.

“Ugh. I guess. If we don’t all die of disease.” Grace wrinkled her nose.

“Any organism on this planet has a fundamentally different biological composition than us. Being infected by their excrement—”

“Well, *excuse* me. Sorry we weren’t all educated in a palace.”

“We didn’t have to come.”

Grace ignored this. “How far are we?”

Jethren sloshed through a puddle, smiling as some of it splashed Grace. “About a hundred yards from the central hub. We’ll be right in the middle of whatever is jamming my signal.”

“Sounds good.” Grace fingered the hilt of her sword.

“I don’t suppose there’s any point in trying to convince you to just let Paladin and Seaworth handle this.”

“None at all.”

“Do you have any detail on this *bad feeling*?”

Grace shrugged.

“Well. As long as we have a concrete reason to defy orders and go into a Death-planet.”

They moved forward in silence, until Grace detected a light up ahead. It was orange and flickering, as if from a fire.

“Jethren,” she said warily.

“I see it too,” he said. “Let me go first.”

Grace flung out her arm and stopped him. “Yeah, right. Both our suits are flameproof, and no offense, but you walk like an elephant.”

Jethren nodded. *We should probably communicate telepathically from now on.*

Grace nodded back, then started forward.

The glow became so bright, she had to squint to look at it. Luckily, it didn’t seem to be coming from a fire. Grace couldn’t feel any heat.

It seemed to be a mere beacon, illuminating the outline of the end of the tunnel. Blinking its orange light every second, so that the tunnel was illuminated in flashes. It was triangle-shaped, hanging just above an archway that dead-ended into wall.

As the beacon flashed again, Grace caught sight of a metal staircase, winding upwards toward a solid-looking gray door.

*Hey—what are the odds that’s open?*

*I think there’s a symbol for garbage disposal on it. It might be unguarded.*

*Or it’s a trap.* They’d be completely exposed for the few seconds it took to climb up the staircase. Anyone coming through the door could pick them off easily.

Still, there was nothing for it but to go forward.

She beckoned Jethren to her, and when he had reached her, she took a deep breath.

*Ready?*

*Sure.*

Grace dashed up the staircase, landing on the balls of her feet to make as little noise as possible. She could still feel the structure shake, and the soft thud of her boots on the metal wasn't completely obscured.

At the top, Grace pressed her ear to the door.

Nothing.

The handle was cold and slippery, nearly slimy. Grace wrinkled her nose, using the tips of her fingers to turn the knob.

To her surprise, the door swung inward easily, making barely a sound on its oiled hinges.

*Too easy?*

*Definitely.*

“Wait!” Jethren shouted, kneeling and pressed his hands into his head. “Grace, STOP!”

Grace shut the door quickly, turning the knob so that it shut noiselessly again. “What is it?”

Jethren shook his head, screwing his eyes up, clearly in a world of pain. “The telepath,” he gritted his teeth. “He knows I’m here. He’s--fighting me.”

“Well, fight back!”

Jethren groaned.

Grace rushed down the stairs to where Jethren leaned against a railing. Before she got there, he fell to his knees, still clutching his head.

“Jethren!” she shouted, but he didn’t seem to hear her. He was biting his lip so hard, it was bleeding.

“Jethren, Crown Prince of Daarthur.” Grace knelt next to him and grabbed his chin, forcing his eyes to hers. “Jethren of Daarthur.”

Jethren's eyes watered in pain.

"Don't you dare give in. You will not die here. You are the only one left to save your people! Jethren of Daarhuurr!"

She kept saying his name, over and over, and finally his posture started to relax, until, with a final huff of pain, he seemed to throw off the attack.

Jethren's eyes opened, and he blinked a few times. "Thank you." He wiped the blood off his chin,

"We good?"

Jethren's hand shot out and grabbed her arm. "No!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Grace said. "We've come this far."

"No—Grace—Paladin. We have to get to Paladin now!"

"What?"

"It's a trap, Seaworth—the prisoners—everything—it was all Seaworth! We have to hurry!" Jethren raced to the door. "He's going to kill them!"

"Where are they?" Grace chased Jethren as he raced through the doorway, not even bothering to check if guards were present.

They were in a dimly lit, narrow corridor. The walls were the color of volcanic ash, and the floor was smooth black tile. Grace and Jethren's boots were the only noise as they raced forward, rounding curve after curve.

Grace was barely able to keep up with Jethren, and at first she was terrified that they would run into a group of sailors, that someone would hear their frantic footsteps and come running.

But that same feeling, the one that had pushed her to jump off the deck of a ship into a volcanic planet, came back. The dark feeling in her chest expanded, taking over all her limbs. She felt as though she was falling into a nightmare, and nothing, no matter how fast or how brave she was, would be enough to stop what was coming.

“Central command!” Jethren finally stopped in front of a set of double doors with a red panel in front of them. His fingers raced across the keys, typing in the code and pressing enter so fast that Grace barely had time to halt before the doors opened. “Come on.”

Jethren pulled Grace through the door.

As the door swung shut behind them, Grace could see two sailors, chatting casually as they rounded the corner toward them.

“Where are the rest of guards?” Grace whispered.

Jethren turned to her. “This isn’t a prison. They transported everyone out of here months ago. These sailors are just trying to extract energy from the volcano. Seaworth wants all of us dead. He’s spying for the Republic.”

Grace started forward, but Jethren grabbed her by the back of her suit, hauling her back. “We need to think,” he said. “If Seaworth is setting a trap for us, we shouldn’t spring it!”

“You can’t be saying what I think you’re saying.” Grace said. “You sound like Dom.”

“If we get back to the ship—” Jethren began, but Grace wasn’t listening. She pulled her communicator off of her belt and typed rapidly, ignoring Jethren’s questions until she’d already sent the message.

“Dom knows. Now let’s go.”

“Grace, he hates you. If you show up, he’s going to try to kill you. I was in his mind. This is—personal for him.”

“Let him try.”

Jethren looked at her, about to argue, but the approaching footsteps of the guards made his decision for him. He grabbed her hand again, and they raced along in earnest. The hallways were laced with red here, the appearance, along with the intermittent lighting and the blackness of the walls, making Grace feel like they were running through a hallway dripping with blood. It seemed to narrow, constricting tighter around them like a giant snake.

In the middle of one such hallway, Jethren stopped. “Wait.”

He turned to a seemingly blank stretch of wall.

Grace nearly fell over as he stopped. “What are you doing?”

“Something’s not right,” Jethren muttered. “I can sense something...faint...” He put his head up against the wall.

“Um, Jethren, are you sure you got that telepath off of you?”

Jethren held up a hand. “Shhh. I think I—” He stepped back and drew his bow staff.

Grace took a step backward, her hand going to her sword hilt. “Jethren...”

But Jethren didn’t seem to hear her. He took a deep breath and spun into a crushing strike, smashing his staff into the wall.

As Grace watched, utterly perplexed, the wall cracked, then shattered like glass, splintering to the floor.

In the narrow space that had been revealed, Tabitha and Jax rested, bound and gagged. Blood trickled from a gash on Tabitha’s forehead, but she tried to sit up as she saw them. Jax was unconscious, slumped against her.

Tabitha’s normally green skin had turned a sickly, waxen yellow. Her green hair hung in lank strands around her face.



Her eyes widened when she recognized them, and Jethren and Grace quickly descended on her, cutting her free.

“Seaworth!” She gasped as soon as her mouth was free. “He’s—” she started to cough.

“We know,” Grace said shortly. “Jethren got past the telepath.” She stepped into the space to feel at Jax’s neck. “I’ve got a pulse,” she said.

“Jax and I were scouting ahead, and Seaworth must have ambushed us from behind.” Tabitha said after her coughing fit subsided, peering over Grace’s shoulder as she peeled back one of Jax’s eyelids. “Is he alright?”

“He’ll be okay,” Grace said. “But we need to get the two of you out of here.”

“I should have seen this coming.” Jethren’s voice was sharp and jaded.

“Seaworth isn’t open to telepathy. There’s no way you could have known.”

“Maybe I could have,” Jethren muttered.

“That’s not you.”

“Maybe it should be.”

“Are you okay to walk?” Grace asked Tabitha.

Tabitha took a deep, heaving breath, then drew herself upright. “Yep. Totally fine. Let me help you get that—” she stopped, swaying.

Jethren grabbed Grace and pulled her out of the way just in time to watch Tabitha vomit all over the floor.

“Okay.” Grace said, trying to think what to do. “Okay.”

*What would Paladin do?*

“Okay.” Grace said. “Tabitha, you’re going to go back the way Jethren and I came, down the sewage tunnels.”

“The sewage tunnels?” Tabitha asked. “I don’t think I—”

“You’ll be fine,” Grace said quickly. “Because I’m getting Dom to send some crew down to meet you and carry you most of the way.”

“*Carry me?*” Tabitha’s eyes flashed green and gold. “I do not—”

“You’re in no condition to come with us.” Grace said. “You have a concussion.”

Tabitha tried to shake her head, only to turn green again. “Fine. How am I supposed to get to the tunnels?”

Grace turned to Jethren. “Jethren is going to take you.”

“Oh, Hell no.” Jethren said. “I am not leaving you to go after Seaworth alone.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You’re not captain. I don’t have to do what you say.”

“Jethren---” Grace pulled him to the side. She spoke in a low voice. “Someone has to go back with Tabitha.”

“It’s not that hard. She’ll figure it out.”

“She can barely walk.”

“Then come back with us!”

“I can’t.”

“Paladin might already be dead.”

“I don’t care.”

“And what happens if you don’t make it out? What happens to the rest of us?”

“Dom—”

Jethren shook his head. “We need a captain. We need *you*.”

Grace looked at him squarely. “I’m going after Paladin.”

Jethren squeezed her hand, sighing as he did so. “For what it’s worth,” he said. “You are my very best friend.”

“I know.”

Jethren looked down the hall. “The control room is at the end of this hallway, last door on your right. There’s one guard behind it.”

“No problem.”

“Seaworth really wants you dead, Grace. More than he wants Paladin dead.”

They embraced, and Jethren helped Tabitha sling Jax across her back. The trio took off down the hallway, Jethren offering his shoulder for support when Tabitha needed it.

Grace watched them for a moment. Then she raced toward the end of the hall.

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Grace didn’t know what she expected to find in the control room.

She’d been hoping that Paladin would be standing there over Seaworth’s dead body, scolding her for disobeying orders in that way he always did, more bluster than anything else.

Grace had definitely expected to walk into a fight; she’d drawn her sword before opening the door, just in case Seaworth or the sailor Jethren had mentioned was waiting to ambush her.

So she was utterly unprepared when she opened the door and found—

Seaworth, kneeling next to Paladin, bandaging a slash across his shoulder. The body of a sailor stretched out on the floor, a single blaster hole in his chest.

“What the Hell are you doing off the ship?” Paladin looked furious, and Grace opened her mouth to tell him what she knew.

Then Seaworth turned, leering at her. His hand went to his knife, and the message was clear, *Tell him anything, and I’ll kill him.*

“Tabitha commed Dom!” Grace invented hastily. “She was hurt. She couldn’t walk back.”

“And you decided to come to us because—”

“I—um—” Grace didn’t know what to do. She had to get Paladin at least out of arm’s reach of Seaworth. “Captain, could I speak to you privately?”

“No.”

“Please,” Grace’s eyes met Paladin’s, and she hoped he could see the warning in them.

“Give us a moment, Seaworth,” Paladin said, getting to his feet slowly.

“No—you’ve gone too soft with her, Paladin. She doesn’t get to monopolize your attention anymore.”

Paladin took a step towards Grace, and Seaworth moved, and Grace realized what was happening at the same moment. She launched herself between them, drawing and activating her sword, just in time to block the descent of Seaworth’s sword, which would have severed Paladin’s head from his neck..

“Captain! Run!” Grace lunged at Seaworth. Seaworth growled in frustration, ducking and sweeping his foot around so that Grace’s legs were knocked from underneath her. She landed on the floor with a thud, her head banging against one of the metal supports for the table. Stars exploded behind her eyes, along with a surge of nausea.

When Grace came to her senses, she struggled to her feet, clutching at the table for support.

Everything was a confusing flurry of swords and sparks. Paladin and Seaworth were fighting, and they circled and lunged and parried, seeming to dance around each other.

Grace knew she had to get in there, but the two were fighting so fiercely, she feared that getting up in the middle of the fight would do more harm than good.

Suddenly, the dance stopped as Seaworth roared in pain, blood blossoming across his face.

“There!” Paladin shouted. “So the whole galaxy can mark you as a traitor!”

Seaworth wiped the blood from the slash across his cheek and laughed. “A traitor? We’re *pirates!* We go to whoever pays.”

“Not us.” Paladin said firmly. “Not my crew. How much did they pay you to give us up?”

Seaworth grinned. “Two million, and I got to do the honors myself. I’m going to be a better captain than you ever were, and I’ll be on the right side of the law.”

Paladin stepped back, shock visible beneath his beard. “You’ll spy for them? Is that what I’ve taught you? What you’ve become?”

Grace took this opportunity to get next to her captain, her purple sword flickering in the light of the displays. “Don’t listen to him, Captain. Seaworth has always been scum.”

“I’m just on the winning side. You’d do well to do the same.”

“I’d never join the Navy!” Grace spat.

Seaworth’s lip curled. “You’ve always been a spoiled little brat. It’s a good thing you came down here. Now I can kill you both.” He lunged, but Grace and Paladin were ready for him, and they beat him back until he was pinned against the wall.

The fight started again, more brutal than it had been, the strength behind each strike making every parry painful. In spite of being outnumbered two to one, Seaworth was the second-best swordsman on the ship, and he was fighting to kill. Paladin and Grace, fighting to disarm,

were more limited, and Grace could feel Paladin flagging next to her. His shoulder was injured, and he'd lost a lot of blood.

Grace gritted her teeth. Maybe Seaworth was the second-best swordsman on board, but the best swordsman in the entire galaxy had trained Grace.

And he'd never forgive her if she lost this fight.

Grace felt herself grow calm as the memories of those training sessions with Jax flooded through her. The way everything could disappear in the fight, apart from her opponent. The way her feet and hands and body moved without conscious thought, as though the dance had already been predesigned.

With Jax's voice ringing encouragement in her ears, Grace surged forward, knocking Seaworth's sword from his hand and leveling hers at his throat. The plasma at the end crackled and singed his skin, and he flinched in pain.

Seaworth held up his hands, but there was still triumph in his eyes. "It doesn't matter anyway," he said. "The volcano is going to erupt any minute."

"You would die just to kill me?" Paladin sounded wounded, and Grace's heart ached.

"Of course. The Admiral himself recommended this mission. You've been a nuisance for far too long. I just hope for their sake that the rest of your crew isn't as loyal as this one." His eyes locked with Grace's, and the malice in them kept her from hesitating.

"At least I'll have the satisfaction of killing you before I die." Grace raised her sword, but Paladin stopped the blow. "Wait!"

"Captain—"

"You would never resign yourself to death," Paladin said, his dark eyes fixed on Seaworth's. "You love yourself far too much for that."

“You underestimate me.”

“You know, I think I really don’t.” Paladin thrust with his sword, and Seaworth screamed in pain as the blade went into his thigh. “Perhaps the rebels will kill you,” he said over Seaworth’s screams. “But there are other ways of dying. And I promise, if you let me and Grace die on this planet with you, I will spend every last moment of my existence making sure yours is filled with agony.”

“Captain...” Grace said tentatively.

“Sometimes you have to play dirty, Grace,” Paladin said grimly. “Let this be a lesson.”

Seaworth was still breathing rapidly, blood trickling down his leg. “Fine. There’s an—escape pod—this way—”

“See? I knew you had a way out,” Paladin said, kicking Seaworth ever-so-lightly where he had been injured.

Seaworth screamed. “What are you doing? I won’t be able to walk!”

Paladin leaned forward so that his face was an inch from Seaworth’s. “Then crawl.”

It turned out that the escape pod was only a few minutes from the control room, which was a good sign, considering the entire complex had started to rumble like an earthquake was coming.

“Dom!” Grace yelled into her communicator. “Jethren!”

“It’s too loud in here.” Paladin shouted. “Can you reach him telepathically?”

*JETHREN!*

*WHAT?*

*I'm on my way.* Grace could hear Jethren asking questions, but she was too focused on Seaworth, who had just opened a door that allowed a blast of blistering heat to roar over them.

Seaworth limped to the threshold, then looked back at them. “Well?”

Grace and Paladin inched forward, both of their swords pointed at Seaworth’s back. “You first.”

Seaworth sighed. “I can’t walk down these steps. Look.” He gestured, and Grace and Paladin saw that he’d led them to what looked like an underground hangar. There was a tunnel at the other end of the massive space, and what looked like an escape pod parked on ground.

To the far left side, lava was seeping in through the wall, already engulfing several other spacecraft.

“If you want me to die, just go ahead and shoot me,” Seaworth said. He moved his injured leg to the first step, and it buckled, causing him to grab onto the railing for support.

“Come on,” Paladin nudged Grace, and they sheathed their swords and stepped forward, supporting him under each arm.

Grace quickly realized that she wasn’t helping; she was too short to offer any support, so she dashed down the steps ahead of them.

“Where’s the—”

Suddenly, there was a scream of pain, and Grace screamed too, because she knew that voice, she knew it, and she had dashed ahead without thinking--

Paladin knelt on the steps, clutching his side, where blood leaked through his fingers, bright red against in the glow of the coming lava

Grace looked around, but Seaworth was nowhere to be seen.

She knelt next to Paladin, pressing her hands against the wound.



“Here—I have some bandages—” Grace ripped a strip from the bottom of her suit and pressed the material to Paladin’s wound.

It was soaked in seconds.

Paladin turned his head until his eyes met hers. “Grace—” he mumbled. “*Move.*”

“What—”

A sword slammed down right next to her, and Grace rolled, drawing her sword as she did so to face Seaworth.

“I’d love to stay here and kill you,” Seaworth said scornfully. “But that might take a while, and well—” there was a crash, and another blast of hot air rushed in. It felt like it singed her eyebrows. “You won’t make it out of here anyway.”

He dashed away and Grace, too concerned with Captain Paladin, watched helplessly as Seaworth clambered into the escape pod and blasted into the sky.

She turned back to Paladin, a tear falling onto his face. “I guess we’re stuck here.”

She knelt and pressed the material to his wound again, knowing that it wouldn’t do any good. She’d seen wounds like this.

Paladin would be dead before the lava reached them.

Paladin grimaced. “Granuaile, you need to get off the planet.”

“Seaworth took the last escape pod.” Grace started to cry.

Paladin looked at her sternly. “I seem to remember a certain girl getting onto a pirate ship without the knowledge of anyone on board.”

“That was different! There’s no ship!”

“Then call for Jethren!”

“There isn’t time! I told them to leave without me.”

“We have that in common.” Paladin grumbled, then coughed. “But there must be another way.”

I’m not leaving you to die alone.”

“Yes, you are. You are going to leave me, and get on that ship, and become the captain you were meant to be.”

Grace pressed down on the bandages. They were soaked with blood. “I can’t do it. Not without you.”

“Yes, you can.” Paladin smiled. “Granuaile. You are more capable than you can possibly imagine.”

“I can’t even get off this planet!” Grace shook her head.

Paladin’s shoulder spasmed, and Grace jumped, fearing the worst. But he just swore and said, “In my pocket, next to my cigarettes.”

“What—”

“In my pocket.”

Grace took one hand from his side, trying to ignore the way the blood glistened in the firelight.

She rummaged in his pocket, ignoring the cigarettes and lighter. There was square object inside, hard and plastic-feeling.

She pulled it out. It was bright purple, the same color as her sword. There was an amethyst on top of it.

“Press the jewel.”

Grace did.

At first, nothing happened, but then a loud buzzing noise started, drowning out even the rumblings of the volcano.

A purple escape pod zoomed through the opening of the hangar and screeched to a stop at the foot of the stairs. As Grace stared in disbelief, the hatch popped open invitingly.

Grace looked down at Paladin. “I thought you said I had to make my own way out.”

“I figured you could use some help.”

Paladin’s eyes started to close as he smiled, and Grace started crying again. “I can get you out now,” she reached beneath him to lift him, but he was too heavy. “I’ll come back—just hang on!”

Paladin coughed, and Grace hated how weak it sounded. How the air rattled in and out of his lungs. Finally, he said, “*The Sea Queen* is the love of my life,” he rasped. “Promise that you will love her as I did, and continue—my legacy. Fight--”

He stopped, but Grace knew what he was going to say. “I swear to you, Captain Paladin. *The Sea Queen* will see the end of the Republic.” She pressed her bloody hand into his and squeezed it. “I swear on my life.”

Paladin closed his eyes. He stopped moving. He stopped breathing.

Grace bent her head to his still chest. It was like she could already feel the warmth, the life, the enormous energy, leaving his body. He already felt smaller in her arms.

“I love you,” she whispered into his chest. And for a moment she wasn’t on this planet, roasting in the heat of a volcano.

For a moment, she was holding a very different man in her arms. One with dark skin and a thick mustache. Whose eyes sought hers as the light left them.

Grace stayed there until the lava crept nearly a quarter of the way across the room. And then, as the flames started to the steps of the platform where she rested, as the smoke stung her eyes, she sprinted into the pod, falling into the seat and taking the controls.

Granuaile sped out of the volcano into the sky.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE HOSTAGE SITUATION

**April 4, 2054**

**Pompeii**

“Incoming!” Jones shouted as a barrage of gunfire rained down. She and Caleb ducked into the shadow of a rock.

“Why are they attacking?”

“Because.” Jones puffed. “They. Are. Assholes.”

Caleb half-laughed in spite of himself. “Where’s our extraction point?”

Jones pulled out her communicator and tapped it to reveal a 3D map. She pointed at a mountain sitting in the center of the landscape. “There.”

“Are you kidding me? We have to climb a mountain?”

Jones tapped the mountain, and it changed to reveal its elevation. “Looks like a pretty quick climb. We should make it up in five or six hours.”

Suddenly, they heard a rumble, louder than the gunfire.

Jones moved to look, but Caleb pulled her back. “Are you crazy?”

His shout rang out over the field, and Caleb suddenly realized that the gunfire had died.

Caleb reached down and threw a rock into the field.

Nothing moved.

Caleb pulled out his scanner.

“Well?” Jones asked, after a moment.

“No heat signatures.”

“So....”

“Sailors!” a voice barked over the communicator. “Get to the extraction point!”

“Waiting for the all clear, Sir.” Jones replied quickly.

“The volcano’s seismic activity indicates an incoming eruption. Repeat. The volcano will erupt.”

“They dropped us into the middle of an active volcano?” Caleb said.

“They must really like us.”

“This is disgusting,” Jones brushed ash from her sleeve.

Caleb glanced back over the terrain they had covered. Only five more miles to go. “I hope the others are making it back okay.”

“Are you kidding me? Hal and Trast are probably at the top already.”

Caleb tapped his comm. “Sailors, radio to me if you need help.”

“Lewis, don’t give orders.”

“Yes, Captain.”

There was a beat, then Icho said, “Sailors, sound off.”

“Unit One.”

“Unit Two.”

“Unit Three.”

“Unit Four.” Jones said, “Ready to go.”

“Unit Five?” Icho said. “Unit Five. Report!”

Nothing.

Caleb shoved Jones, raising his eyebrows.

She shook her head. “They’re fine. Probably just dropped the comm into the volcano.”

“Unit Five, do you copy?”

There was a long silence, then: “Captain! This is Cadet Kellum with Unit Five—east side—fire—” There was a blast of static, then silence.

Caleb grabbed Jones’ arm. “Check their location!”

She huffed, but tapped the comm, pulling up the red dots that represented the groups assembled around the mountain. “They’re right here.” She pointed to a red dot on the east side of the mountain. “See? Totally f—”

The red dot had disappeared.

“All sailors are ordered to proceed with haste to their extraction points.”

Before Caleb could say anything, Jones spoke: “Captain, Unit Four requests leave to assist Unit Five.”

“Jones, you have your orders. Get to the extraction point.”

“But—”

“That’s an *order*, sailor! Over and out.”

Caleb and Jones looked at each other.

“No.” Jones said again. “Absolutely not. There is ash *raining from the skies*.”

“We can’t leave them!” Caleb said.

“Yes, we can. I don’t even like Kellan and Trast.” Jones put the communicator in her pocket and started forward. “Come on. You’ll feel better when you’re moving.”

“You’re right,” Caleb said, promptly turning around and descending back down the mountain.

“Where are you going?”

“The East side.”

“They’re probably dead!”

“You don’t have to come.”

“Yes, I do.”

“The others are probably already back on the ship, planning our funeral.” Jones said.

“Stop being so dramatic,” Caleb said. “We still have plenty of time.”

“I mean, beyond the giant volcano about to erupt on top of us, there’s the fact that whoever was shooting at us before has probably already killed Kellan and Trast, and is no doubt lying in wait for us.”

Caleb whipped around. “If the volcano’s about to explode any second, wouldn’t they have gotten off the planet by now?”

Jones glared at him.

“We’re almost there,” Caleb said. He walked on, stopping to clamber atop a large rock. “The coordinates said the signal died...about...here.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” Jones said, climbing up beside him.

Where the coordinates indicated, there was a massive crater in the planet. It must have been half the size of the ship, and everything in its radius was burnt and blackened. Small fires had broken out here and there.

“Do you see any bodies?” Caleb shaded his eyes.

“Would there *be* any bodies?”

And even though Caleb’s instincts were starting to echo Jones in an increasingly demanding way, Caleb stepped down from the rock and into the crater.

“What the Hell did this?” Jones asked.



“Some kind of cannon, I’m guessing,” Caleb said, drawing his blaster. “This is bad.”

“I know,” Jones grumbled. “That’s why we should go back.”

“We should at least make sure they’re dead first.” Caleb walked around the crater, trying to gauge how far it might have blasted something.

“See anything?” He called to Jones, who remained on top of the rock.

“No—wait! Over to your right—it looks like there’s something in those bushes.

Caleb winced, walking over to where Jones had pointed. He really had no desire to see blackened and burned bodies, especially those belonging to his comrades. To Hal, who had befriended him his first day at the Academy. Hal, who was his closest friend since...

As he got closer, he saw that the branches of the bush were broken in places, and there was a dark shape huddled on the ground behind one.

The shape didn’t stir as Caleb got closer, but he noticed blood glistening on the branches and the ground.

Caleb crept up to the figure, peering down at it. The face was blackened from soot, but it looked like—“Trast?”

The figure moved, and as it did, it took on the shape of their fellow cadet. His blonde hair still gleamed beneath the ash. Trast got up and wiped dust from his eyes, then looked up at Caleb dazedly. “Caleb?”

“How the Hell did you survive?” Caleb asked, reaching a hand down to pull Trast to his feet.

Trast blinked. “Kellan--HAL!” He rushed forward, but Caleb grabbed onto him. “Look at me! Calm down. We’ve got enemies all around, and the volcano’s about to explode.”

Trast gulped. “Hal offered to scout ahead, look for mines. He was always the best at that in the Academy, so I stayed a couple steps behind him. He said it was all clear, so I started walking up. Then he said, “Wait!” and then---

“Boom,” Jones said, startling Caleb.

“Shut up!” Caleb hissed, as Trast’s chin trembled. “Trast, the mine must not have knocked Kellan out. He radioed for help before the transmission cut out.”

“He did?” Trast asked. “I don’t—” His brow furrowed.

“The head injury will do that,” Jones said grimly. “We need to get you looked at by Medical.”

“Hang on,” Caleb said, over Jones’ groan of protest. “Do you remember who attacked you? Who was shooting at us earlier?”

“I couldn’t see,” Trast said bemusedly. “The clouds—” he stopped, as a flake of ash landed on his cheek. He took it off and looked at it, looking as though he might cry. “I’m going to die anyway, aren’t I?”

“Not if I can help it,” Jones said. “Like Hell will I die before watching Caleb get his ass chewed by Captain Icho.”

“Speaking of,” Caleb said. “We need to get to the extraction point. Can you walk?”

Trast nodded, then immediately closed his eyes and turned green beneath the ash.

“Vertigo.” Jones said. “Typical.”

“Shut up and help me,” Caleb said, positioning himself under Trast’s arm.

Jones rolled her eyes, but took the other one.

“How far is it to the extraction point?”

“Oh, just....you know...up the mountain.”

“How. Far?”

“About five miles, if we go the quick path. It’s a lot steeper, though.”

Caleb bit his lip. “Doesn’t matter. You’ll have to do it.”

“Me?” Jones asked, as Trast groaned between them.

“I’m going after Hal.” Caleb said. “You’ll need to tell them to wait for us—”

“He’s dead! Blown up! Are you crazy?” Jones nearly dropped Trast in shock. “You’re just going to get yourself killed.

“Maybe so,” Caleb said. “But he’d do the same for me.”

“Well. Great.” Jones let go of Trast’s arm, and he clutched Caleb for support before getting his feet under him. He swayed, then smiled.

“Great.” Jones said. “See that rose bush up there, way up top of the hill?”

Trast nodded.

“You get to it, you don’t get to die.”

“Okay.” Trast took a step forward, then swayed.

“Ugh!” Jones said. She grabbed him by the fatigues and pulled him in, kissing him thoroughly on the mouth.

“Um.” Caleb said.

She broke away, and Trast’s hands held her for a moment, before letting go. “What was that?”

“You need to focus.” Jones said. “Might as well be on me. Get up there, and I’ll kiss you again.”

Trast opened his mouth to argue, but Jones just said, “Seems like you’re hurting your chances, kid.”

Trast nodded wearily and trudged toward the hill. When he was out of earshot, Caleb rounded on Jones, “What the *hell*...?”

Jones shrugged. “You’re welcome.”

“Are you going to kiss me to get me to go back to the ship too?”

Jones eyed him, deadpan. “I don’t waste my time with lost causes.”

Caleb grinned. “Let’s go get our boy.”

“Whatever.”

The ground dropped off into a cliff just ahead, and Caleb leaned out over it, then immediately dropped to the ground.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“Looks like I found Hal.”

Jones peeked over the edge. “Pirates? Here?”

“I know.” Caleb rubbed a hand across his forehead. “How many are there?”

Jones tapped a few commands into her communicator, and the glowing heat signatures of themselves and their enemies showed up. “Eight. Too many for us.” She ran her hand over the handle of her blaster. “Especially since they didn’t give us any long-range weapons.”

Caleb nodded. “So what do we do?”

“Call for backup?” Jones said hopefully.

“I guess it’s the only thing we can do.” Caleb switched his communicator back to their frequency. “Captain? Captain Icho, this is Squad Four.”

“Lewis? If you don’t get back here right now—”

“Sir, we’ve found Cadet Kellan. He’s being held hostage by a group of pirates.”

“Good for him.”

“Captain, with all due respect—”

“Don’t give me that, Lewis. Get to the extraction point in ten minutes, with or without Hal, or I’m leaving you here when the volcano explodes. I don’t care who your father is.”

“But Captain!” Caleb protested. “We’re outnumbered! We need you to send us reinforcements.”

“You wanted to be in charge, Lewis. Figure it out.”

The transmission cut out.

“Awesome.” Jones said. “Now what?”

Caleb looked at her. “Do you still have the grenades?”

“Yeah. Why?” Jones asked, then immediately realized what Caleb had in mind. “No.”

“It could work.”

“You’ll start a rockslide!”

“We can grab him while they’re distracted!”

“That’s insane.”

“You got any better ideas?”

Jones sighed, then leaned in and kissed Caleb. “In case we die.” She said.

“What—”

“Oh, don’t be such a nerd. I just didn’t want the last mouth I kissed to be Trast’s mouth.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Angela.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Caleb crept to the bottom of the cliff, where the pirates had sheltered beneath an overhang.

Hal was sitting huddled in the back, his hands bound in front of him, a rag in his mouth. One of the pirates, a man around Caleb's age with a handlebar mustache, watched him closely.

The rest seem unbothered, checking their own weapons and wandering around the site. As Caleb watched, one of them, a woman with orange skin and long blonde hair, said, "How long did Icho want us to hold him, do you remember?"

Caleb jumped. He knew that girl! It was Julie Ulysses, one of the cadets that had washed out of the Academy the first week.

Caleb narrowed his eyes. Something wasn't right. Washouts took positions in administration. They never became pirates.

"We kill him when Caleb gets back to the ship, or in a few minutes." Mustache said.

"This better be worth it," Ulysses muttered. "I am *not* going back to the farm."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it." Mustache said.

"Not if I get there first," a man with bright red hair spoke, and Caleb jumped as he recognized another face. Keith. One of the other washouts.

Keith had gotten kicked out when the Instructors got too tired of pulling his knives out of people.

Hal suddenly made a ton of noise, muffled though it was, through the gag.

"What do *you* want?" Mustache asked.

Hal whimpered.

Mustache removed the gag, and Hal coughed. “Thank you.” He coughed again, then turned to Keith. “Did you get a haircut? It looks great. You always looked like a greasy rat before.”

Keith punched Hal in the face. Caleb winced.

Keith whipped out a knife, tracing it along Hal’s neck.

“I wonder how many smart things you’d have to say if I cut out your tongue first.”

Hal opened his mouth to say something, and thankfully, Caleb heard a soft *boom*.

“What was that?” Keith hissed.

Caleb looked in the direction of the rocks, and had to suppress a whistle of admiration. Jones had placed the grenades in exactly the right places, and the rocks were sliding, gathering momentum as they tumbled directly toward the group.

“Everyone out!” Mustache shouted.

“What about Kellan?” Ulysses asked.

“Tie him to the tree.”

Ulysses grabbed a cord, wrapped it around Hal’s leg, and tied it to the tree. Hal looked at her imploringly, but she didn’t make eye contact.

Mustache hoisted his pack over his shoulder and spoke into his comm. “This is Waters. Subject is eliminated. We’re heading to the extraction point.”

“Great work, Waters. Head out.”

The group raced out of the ravine, and Caleb waited barely a second before darting forward, his knife already in his hand.

“Oh thank God,” Hal said. “Getting crushed would *ruin* my career.”

“Shut up,” Caleb muttered, sawing through the rope. He could hear the rocks tumbling closer, and Hal’s leg was trembling beneath his hands.

“Just hurry it along. No rush.”

“Shut up.” Caleb sawed through the cord. He pulled Hal to his feet, and they took off into the trees.

Jones waited at a cliff out of range of the rockslide, her face streaked with dust and ash.

“You helped?” Hal exclaimed when he saw her. “So you really do miss me!”

Jones ignored him. “We need to go before Icho leaves us.”

“He did just try to have me killed,” Hal said. “So I’m not exactly a big fan of going back at the moment.”

“He did *what*?” Jones rounded on Caleb.

Caleb held out a hand, pulling out his comm. “Captain, we’ve secured Cadet Kellan and we’re headed for the extraction point.”

“Excellent work, Lewis.” Icho’s voice held none of the frustration it had before. “See you up here.”

“So....” Hal said.

“It was a test.” Jones said. “Had to be. They weren’t really gonna kill you.”

Caleb shook his head. “None of this makes sense.” He said, just as Hal retorted, “They left me to die in *rockslide*. ”

“It was a test,” Caleb said. “My father told me about something similar he did with his cadets once.”

“That’s fucked up.” Hal said bluntly.

Caleb shrugged.



Jones jumped in before Hal could say anything else. “Can we please just get out of here before we get burned alive by molten lava?”

Caleb typed a few commands into the map on his comm. “Okay. First we have to scale this cliff. And we also don’t have climbing equipment, so we’ll have to freehand it.”

“Sounds ideal,” Hal said.

“Where are we?” Jones asked an hour later, after they’d made it over the cliff and been walking on the plateau for an hour.

Little bits of embers stung their cheeks every now and then, as the volcano picked up in intensity. Up ahead, the mountain that housed the volcano loomed above them, a deep tunnel carved into its side.

“Isn’t this the extraction point?” Hal asked.

Caleb pulled out his communicator. “It says it’s right here, next to this tunnel.”

“So where’s the ships?” Hal put his hand on his brow, shielding his face from the Sun as he scanned the sky.

“Captain Icho!” Caleb spoke into his comm. “Captain Icho, do you read?”

“Lewis, what the Hell have you been doing?”

“Sorry, sir. Lost communication and navigability, sir. But we’re up and running now, sir.”

Caleb could practically hear Icho’s disbelief over the phone. “What’s your 20?”

“We’re at the agreed-upon extraction point, Captain.”

“Then what’s the problem? Why aren’t you back at the ship?”

“Sir, there don’t seem to be any ships.”

Captain Icho was silent. Then, “Are you inside the mountain?”

Next to Caleb, Hal started swearing profusely.

“Captain, please repeat.”

“You should be inside the mountain. There are Poles that should get you back to the ship.”

Caleb closed his eyes. “How far in?”

Icho’s reply was brusque. “As far as they need to be. It was on your Planetary Report.”

Caleb opened his eyes to see Hal displaying rude hand gestures at the sky.

“Yes, of course, Sir. It just—slipped my mind, Sir.” Caleb said.

“Excellent. I’ll see you back on board. And do hurry, eruption’s due in the next thirty minutes. Icho out.”

Caleb looked at Hal. “You didn’t read the Planetary Report, did you?”

“No one reads those! They’re like a hundred pages long.”

“Except me.” Jones said.

“Except you,” Hal admitted, turning to her. He peered down the dark tunnel. “How far do you think we are?”

“28 minutes,” Jones said. “If we run.” At that, she took off, Caleb and Hal scrambling to catch up with her.

They were about to step inside when they heard a long, echoing scream, followed by the sound of retching and cursing.

“Hold still!” a voice said.

“I’m gonna—”

“Ugh gross!” Another voice said.

“Tabitha, you have to stay on the pod so we can get you out faster.”

“Tabitha, if you don’t fucking suck it up I’m going to—” the rest was inaudible, but it was enough for Hal to call out, “Who’s there?”

Caleb clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Wait, what is that?” Jones whispered.

Caleb tilted his head to the side. There was a whirring coming from inside the tunnel. Caleb squinted. A silver shape was hurtling toward them.

Comprehension and panic dawned on Caleb at the same time. “DUCK!” He shouted, pulling Jones and Hal to the ground just in time for what looked like a modified escape pod to zoom over them.

Caleb prayed they hadn’t been seen, and at first it seemed like they hadn’t. The whirring subsided.

Then, within seconds, the whirring intensified, and the pod swooped directly in front of them.

There were four people in the pod. One human with short blonde hair and tattoos, a purple Hidari woman, a yellow-tinged Tree, and a species Caleb couldn’t identify, a boy with cat eyes and a sour expression.

*Pirates, Caleb thought. Real pirates.*

But why would pirates be on Pompeii? Didn’t they know that all the prisons had been evacuated?

The clear top opened, and the human walked off the pod, drawing a longsword from his back. “Who the Hell are you?” He swayed drunkenly on the spot, causing Jones to mutter, “Is he serious?”

We are Admiral Lee's Navy!" Caleb said, trying to deepen his voice. "Who the Hell are you?"

Caleb grasped for his cutlass, but stopped when the human's sword leveled at his throat. "Please, we mean you no harm," he said, thinking quickly. "But this planet is in danger. Could you please take us to our extraction point?"

The pointy-eared one with cat eyes looked them up and down, his lip curling in dislike. "We don't help Navy scum," he said.

"I assume you were involved in the maintenance of the prison." The human said, stepping back onto the pod, nearly falling into his seat as he did so. "I hope you're incinerated along with it." He leaned down to press a button, but Caleb was too desperate to let him get away. "We'll pay you handsomely to help us!" he said.

The human scoffed.

"We don't want your money," the cat-eyed one said. "Have fun in the volcano."

"Please." Caleb said quietly.

The cat-eyed one looked at him for a moment, frowning, then hopped down from the pod.

"Jethren—" the Hidari spoke for the first time, but he just held up a hand.

"I've never heard one of the Navy beg before," he murmured. His eyes locked with Caleb's, and Caleb felt a curious sensation go over him. It felt like someone was suctioning his stomach out of his forehead.

Caleb tried to wrench his gaze away, but he couldn't. The feeling intensified, leaving a hollowness inside his chest. At the same time, a headache started behind his eyes, and images flashed through his consciousness.

There was a man, sitting across from him at the dinner table, impossibly tall and strong. A woman, leaning down to kiss his forehead while he slept. A little girl with wild hair and gray eyes, tugging him into the cornfields, daring him to play. Looking up at the stars from a wooden floor. The Academy, looming up out of the darkness through headlights—

*You know her*, a voice said, resounding in his head as though it echoed. *But it will not matter soon.*

“Stop!” Caleb cried.

*For her, I will help you just this once, Caleb Lewis.*

There was a flash of red pain, then black, and Caleb opened his eyes to find himself still standing, as Jethren spoke to the human and the Tree. “Take them to the Poles.”

“What the Hell?” the man interrupted. “What did you see?”

Jethren shook his head. “I will tell only the captain. But these people need to live.”

The human looked at him through narrowed eyes. “I hate when you get like this, but you’ve never been wrong before.” He leaped down and helped them into the pod. “Stay upwind of Tabitha. She smells like a toilet.”

“This is a terrible idea,” the Hidari said. “We should just kill them.”

Tabitha grumbled.

“This isn’t a discussion” the human said. “Let’s go.”

“Thank you,” Caleb said, as the pod shot off.

“You tell your captain how you got back, and I will make sure I kill you. I don’t care if I have to set off another volcano to do it.” The human glared at them, and the tightness of his jaw made the tattoo of a snake along his face look all the more terrifying.

“Got it.” Hal said.

“Good.”

They flew the rest of the way in silence, and Caleb was relieved when the Poles came in sight.

“Thank you,” Caleb said again, but before he could add anything else, he felt something shove him from behind, and he fell into the dirt.

“Nice,” Hal said, pulling himself to his feet. Jones spat a mouthful of dirt out in disgust. Caleb opened his mouth to shout something at the people in the pod, but it had already gone.

“Come on.” Jones raced over to one of the Poles, typing the code in.

“So how do we explain getting here so fast to the captain?” Hal asked.

“We run really fast when we’re faced with imminent destruction?” Jones offered.

“So we’re going to escape death by volcano to only be murdered by the Captain.” Hal said, as the Pole lit their faces up in blue light.

“Fantastic.”

## CHAPTER XII

### JETHREN

#### *Captain's Log January 1, 2060*

*I am the only person awake.*

*Morning will come soon, and the sunlight dials will slowly turn to dawn, simulating the grand experiences that were so common on Earth.*

*How often did Grace and I watch as the inky darkness lightened to the grays and blues of dawn, as rays of light made their way across the sky?*

*I never would have thought that we would be on opposite sides of a war. I never would have thought that I cannot live while she lives. I never would have imagined the choice I must make, not only for myself, but for Hal and Angela and my crew as well.*

*That's the problem, the thing that has me wandering the corridors.*

*Angela came to my office last night, and she looked different. Her typically immaculate uniform was wrinkled and disheveled, and her eyes were bloodshot.*

*"I need to talk to you." She shut the door.*

*I could see the hesitation in her, the way she had chewed on the words she wanted to tell me.*

*"You're still thinking about what she said. About betraying us."*

*"I would never betray the Republic—"*

*"You already have." She held out her hands, and I saw the places she'd clenched her fists so hard, the nails had bitten through her skin. They stood out like pinpricks of red against her dark sin.*

*"I am still—"*

*“You will join her and leave us. You will take us apart so that you can feel better. Do you know what she is? Or are you too blind to remember why Admiral Lee wants her in the first place?”*

*“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”*

*“I do. I know you better than anyone.” She put her hands in mine. “We’re the same,” she whispered. “I’ve always known it. I recognized it the first time you jumped into that fight.”*

*“We’re the same.” I repeated. I couldn’t think what else to say.*

*“Are we?” Fierce, accusing. Uncompromising.*

*“You know that I am loyal to the Republic—”*

*“You are loyal to me!” she shouted. “Just as I am loyal to you. Republic, Lee, the Rebellion-- none of it matters. What matters is that through it all, I’ll be by your side. We’ll face whatever we have to--together.”*

*“But what if there was a way out?” I thought of Grace in my arms, that knowing look she gave me. Like she knew what my choice was going to be all along.*

*But how could I make it? How could I make either choice without hating myself?*

*Jones’ eyes glistened with unshed tears, but there wasn’t sadness behind them. There was just hurt, and a swelling rage. “I would have died for you. I would have done anything only to see you happy.”*

*“But now,” she let out a sharp laugh and shook her head. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she brushed it away. “Now, if you decide to go to her. If you decide to betray us—”*

*She headed for the door, throwing the parting words over her shoulder like she didn’t care who heard, didn’t care if the whole ship found out exactly whose side she was on.*

*“I will kill you myself.”*



*Dawn is breaking, and my fingers dial the same code, over and over. Replaying those last moments. Wishing for more. More time to understand, to explain.*

*Here is what I have been told about Granuaile, The Pirate Queen:*

*She has massacred every settlement she has raided, even when it nearly caused her to be caught.*

*Her wrath, when raised, is executed not only against her enemies, but their families. She will kill you and everyone you have ever met.*

*The other pirates in the galaxy have all sworn loyalty to her, and she enriches herself on their take as much as her own. She is a pirate queen, the first and only person to command even the outlaws.*

*The only person she serves is a woman crazier than she is, Elizabeth Tudor.*

*Her crew is full of humans and aliens, at once as willing to sleep with her as die for her.*

*She murdered the Heir of Daarthuur in cold blood, setting off a period of instability and violence that would have ensured the planet's destruction, if not for the Republic.*

*How much of this is true?*

*Because here is what I know about Grace O'Malley:*

*A hand clasped to mine in the darkness of the tunnels.*

*Her lips pressed to mine in that gray, insubstantial era between light and morning.*

*Sticky, bloody handprints against the white front door.*

*A worn, callused hand in mine, and the entire galaxy on hold. Our faces pressed against an alternate reality, like a rip in the space-time continuum. Feeling that future brush against my face like a round of blaster fire.*

*"I have missed you."*

*Holding her against me, and recognizing something in the set of her shoulders, the smooth rhythm of her breath. The way she exhaled, like she'd been waiting for this for a long time.*

*The unerring knowledge that I don't ever want to stop chasing her, unless it is to hold her close.*

*"You have a crush," Angela accused me those months before our first meeting.*

*But this isn't a crush, a passing fancy. A poster of her, composed of rose-colored perceptions and propaganda, tacked up on the wall of my bedroom.*

*When she told me that she would come for me, when she whispered those words in my ear, I felt something more than the temptation of something unknown and unfamiliar and forbidden.*

*This is...recognition. Understanding.*

*As if I have been waiting for exactly this version of her, exactly this moment, for my entire life.*

*And I am so afraid.*

*Because I know how this will end.*

**March 1, 2052**

**Rainbow City, Daarthuur**

It had just rained when *The Sea Queen* landed. Multiple rainbows emerged, a trick orchestrated by the two suns that hung over the lush landscape.

The asphalt runway that made up the docks of Rainbow City gleamed, a contrast to the smoothly undulating waves that formed the landing platforms. Rainbow City preferred to use most of its land for housing. Transportation was a thoroughfare of gray stone walkways that connected the docks to the bungalows of taverns and repair shops.

The cliffs that loomed just beyond the majority of the docking area had massive mansions and hotels built directly into the weathered stone. They glimmered in the strong sunlight, promising grandeur and mystery, culminating in the grandest dwelling of them all, a gray stone palace with a lone turret reaching toward the sky.

Grace loved the way this planet looked after rain, the way it seemed to make the entire landscape glow. The deep green mountains in the distance glimmered, and the ocean where the ship floated was a royal blue. It fled all the way to the horizon, looking as though it touched the storm clouds in the distance.

Daarthuur's rainbows, wider and bigger than any that she'd ever seen on Earth, lent even more spectacle to the fantasy. It made her feel like the universe was so much bigger, so much more possible, than she had ever imagined.

It made that weight on her chest, the one that hadn't gone away since she'd stowed away on *The Sea Queen*, feel a little bit lighter.

Dominya had dashed off the dock at the first opportunity, Salt and Jax trailing close behind. Dom was supposed to meet with Pleaides' old contact, ensure that Captain Paladin and

*The Sea Queen* would have the same access to vital fuels, processors, and other jargon that Grace hadn't bothered to understand.

The minute Dominya had proposed the mission, Paladin had told her that Grace needed to stay behind.

"But she needs protection!" Grace protested.

"Jax and Salt will accompany her. They will be more than enough should any problems arise."

"She needs *me*."

"Stowaways don't get perks," Paladin said, his expression tough and dangerous. Gone was the man who'd held her as she cried after her first battle.

This was the pirate captain. Ruthless, formidable.

He'd already thrown two sailors that had managed to survive their wounds into space.

Grace paced the deck, looking anxiously at the weakening sunlight. Just before descending the gangplank, Seaworth and Paladin had approached her.

"If you're thinking of getting off this ship," Seaworth growled. "Paladin has promised I get to do the honors."

Grace rolled her eyes. "They think I'm dead on Earth. I don't see what the problem is."

"That's the problem!" Seaworth pointed at the giant metallic-looking structure that sparkled in the Suns. It was set a mile or so down the docks, at the final end of the line of taverns and repair shops that thronged the area. It stuck out, taller and sharper than the rest.

As Grace watched, the huge metal doors at the front opened, and a collection of black uniforms rushed out, dashing toward the entrance of one of the bungalows.

"Someone knows you didn't die on Earth. They're looking for you."

Grace rolled her eyes. “So I’ll wear a disguise. One of Tabitha’s wigs—”

“Stay. Here.” Paladin interrupted. He stalked off, his long trench coat swishing behind him.

Seaworth stayed behind for a moment. “I wish you’d give me a reason.” He drew his knife, turning it so that the light glanced off the edges. “I really wish you would.” He smiled at her, revealing perfect white teeth.

Before Grace could do more than stand there, trembling, he had gone.

She didn’t understand why Seaworth hated her so much. There was an intensity in his eyes. He watched her like he was waiting to get her alone. With Dominya and Jax on the ship and the way she’d progressed in training, Grace wasn’t worried. Jax had taken to staring Seaworth down whenever he watched Grace, and Dominya never let Grace out of her sight, in spite of Grace’s constant admonitions that she could take care of herself.

Grace shook her head. She couldn’t think about Seaworth right now.

She lowered the gangplank and rushed down the docks as soon as the last crewmember had stumbled off for the taverns.

The voice in her head was far too insistent to be ignored.

The words had appeared a few hours ago, sharp and clear with desperation.

So authentic and foreign that it couldn’t have been a hallucination. *If you can hear me, please come. I am going to die..*

It had been accompanied by the image of a boy, no older than thirteen, in brown, blood-stained robes, looking right at her with cat-like golden eyes, his arms held up by two Sailors, as he was dragged backwards into an imposing metal fortress.

The very fortress that rested just on the edge of the port's taverns, where a swarm of Navy buzzed like an infestation. The fortress that Seaworth and Paladin had warned her against.

Grace descended the gangplank and locked it shut behind her. With any luck, no one would notice she was missing until the next morning.

Then she disappeared into the flow of travelers that headed toward the taverns.

If Paladin knew where she was headed, if Seaworth knew, she'd be dead. Paladin would string her from the end of the gangplank and take the ship into hyperspace, he'd told her so a thousand times.

Grace focused on the image of the boy in her head. *I'm coming.*

*They make shift change when the Suns are on the verge of setting. I'll be on the sea side, and there will only be one of them. Please.* He showed her the image of the fortress again.

Grace had never met someone who could speak to her mind before, but she'd seen people with their eyes hovering over their heads, people with beaks. And just last week, she'd had to clean an entire section of the crew's quarters in zero gravity.

She was pretty sure she wasn't crazy.

The tavern closest to the fortress was the ugliest on the shore. Brawls had broken out all around it, and Grace kept slipping on the rain-dampened walkway, which now seemed to be graffitied with an endless array of names and dates.

Suddenly, Grace heard that voice in her head again.

*I'm coming out. Hurry!*

Grace's hand went to the hilt of her sword. If she activated it, she'd draw attention. Sailors would be on her before she even saw the boy.

She sidled past the crowd gathered in front of the tavern. By the shouts and thuds of blows, she guessed that a particularly ugly fight had broken out.

Suddenly, a new image flashed into her mind.

Without hesitation, Grace swerved, ducking underneath the arms of the crowd, using her small height and stature to fit through the gaps. She wrinkled her nose at the stench of unwashed bodies, alcohol, and sweat.

Just in front of the tavern's entrance, a scaly, reptilian alien was battling with some species that looked like it was composed entirely of rocks. As Grace watched, the rock-alien swayed and fell to the ground with a thud.

In the ensuing roar, Grace darted around the perimeter of the fight, slipping through the doorway just as the crowd roared again.

*Hurry.*

Grace straightened and looked around the bar.

It was packed, the brawl outside seemingly a small price to pay for the enormous, colorful dance floor. Bodies twisted and gyrated all around her, watched by those at the bar, who were tossing back glowing, multicolored drinks with impunity.

She was going to be in so much trouble when she got back.

Grace pushed her way to the bar, ducking underneath a belching man as she did so.

"What'll it be?" a Bluvian leaned forward, his white dreadlocks gleaming in the lights.

"I'm just looking for someone," Grace said.

"I hope you're looking for an exit. You're way too young to be in here, kid." He made to come out from behind the bar, but before he could, Grace vaulted over the bar and sprinted past him, making for the staff entrance at the back.

“What’re you—”

Grace’s hand knocked something, and she heard a loud CRASH.

*Whoops.*

Grace dashed through the door and sprinted down the alleyway.

She could hear threats mixed with curses, and she knew she had only moments before the bartender emerged from whatever mess she had caused.

Grace glanced around wildly, but there was nothing but a dumpster on her right, and the imposing, gleaming metal of the fortress just in front of her. The entrance was shut, and Grace had little doubt guards waited just beyond it.

*Where are you?* She thought, hoping the boy would hear.

*They heard something outside. Give me a couple of minutes.*

*What? I’m here now.*

*Well, wait.*

*I can’t wait. I have a problem.*

*Fix it!*

*Maybe I should just leave you.*

*Fine. Leave me to die.*

Grace took a deep breath and threw open the top of the dumpster, shutting herself in just as she heard the bartender stumble into the alleyway.

The stench was awful. She didn’t even want to think about what she might be standing in, or where it had come from.

Something squelched around her boots.

*These are the only boots I have. I’m going to have to throw them out.*



*Oh I'm sorry. Is my mortal peril inconveniencing you?*

She heard the thud of heavy steps outside the dumpster. There was a tiny sliver of light between the lid and the metal of the dumpster. Grace peered through it.

It was the bartender. His nostrils, so sunken in his face, widened as he sniffed the air.

Grace froze. Bluvians had intense sensory receptors. They usually wore dampeners in crowded areas—the smell of so many other bodies was too overwhelming.

Could he smell her?

She silently cursed herself for applying some of Tabitha's perfume before leaving. If the stench of the garbage somehow hadn't managed to mask it, if he even caught a whiff of her scent—

The bartender sniffed again, and Grace closed her eyes.

Then a voice shouted, "Tally, get in here! Someone's stealing the vodka."

"What? Who?"

"Some Navy guys, say it's part of the tax."

The bartender walked back toward the door, grumbling.

Grace heard the door close behind him, and she let out her breath.

She opened her eyes, then narrowed them as the smell stung them. She gagged. She could taste it now.

*I'm coming out now.*

*Where?*

*Right in front of you.*

Grace knew she should probably wait to count the guards, figure out a good escape route, but she was on the point of vomiting from the smell.

Paladin was really going to kill her.

*Duck.*

Grace burst out of the dumpster, refuse and garbage flying everywhere, her sword coming to life and sweeping in front of her in two swift chops.

Grace landed on the ground, her sword held out in front of her defensively.

It wasn't necessary. The sailors who'd been holding Jethren had somehow been maneuvered just in front of the dumpster, within reach of Grace's blade.

"That was awesome," the boy said. He stared at their decapitated trunks with satisfaction. "I tried to overwhelm their minds and force them over, but in the end I just pretended to trip. I suppose I should feel bad for them..." he rambled on, with the air of someone who hadn't been allowed to speak for a long time.

Now that she was closer, Grace could see that the boy wasn't human. He had pointed ears, and his eyes were slitted like a cat's.

"What *are* you?" Grace asked.

The boy stopped his monologue to frown at her, his ears tilting forward slightly. "I'm a Daarthuurian, of course. Don't you know whose planet you're on?"

Grace tipped her head to the side. "You can talk?"

"Of course I can talk."

"I mean—"

"You were the only person I've met so far who can hear me." He looked her up and down. "Lucky me."

"You're welcome."

“Whatever.”

“Well,” Grace said awkwardly. “It was nice knowing you, but I’ve really got to get back, so—”

“Wait! You can’t leave me here! They’ll just take me again!”

“Maybe they won’t if you’re not dumb enough to get yourself captured this time.”

“You don’t understand—” he stood and walked closer to her, and she felt that curious presence in her mind again.

A cavalcade of images careened through Grace’s mind:

Daarthuur’s twin moons, shining over a play room with big glass windows, as a woman hummed in the corner.

“Jethren Song,” a voice said. “You will have to be very brave.”

“I am brave,” a small voice said, and Grace caught the image of a little boy, cat eyes wide over a storybook. The book looked different in the dark; it seemed to glow, and Grace realized she was seeing the book through the boy’s eyes, adapted to see well in all types of lighting.

“I know you are,” the voice said. “But things are coming. Things that will change everything.”

One of the moons was blotted out by a ship, bigger and darker than any the boy had ever seen. It seemed to overwhelm the very sky.

And then the screaming started. It took over the nursery, turned it into shadows and flame. Hands grabbed at her, and she cried out.

She opened her eyes to see the boy standing before her, glaring defiantly.

“Jethren,” she said quietly, and he nodded.

“I can’t go back,” he said.

“Our ship is leaving in the morning. I’ll tell Captain Paladin that you’re my new apprentice.”

“Apprentice to what?”

“Janitorial duties.”

The boy wrinkled his nose. “I don’t clean. I’m a prince.” He sighed before Grace could interrupt him. “But I suppose I don’t have a choice.”

He moved, and Grace noticed something catch the light. “What’s that? Around your neck?”

He shoved it beneath his white shirt, but not before Grace caught a glimpse of gleaming gold, and two snakes twining about each other. “Nothing.”

“Well, make sure ‘nothing’s’ well-hidden, or it’s like to get stolen.”

“Stop treating me like I’m an idiot. I know pirates as well as any.”

Grace rolled her eyes.

They stood there in wary silence, watching each other. Grace was trying to remember where she’d seen that symbol before.

“Well, are you going to take me to your ship, or are we going to wait for some more sailors to find me?”

The corner of Grace’s mouth twitched. “Sorry. Let’s go.”

The gangplank opened, and Grace’s face fell. The crew stood scattered about on the deck, some lounging in the pilot’s chair, others typing away quickly on their communicators. A

few were still dressed to go out, in long, sparkling dresses and collared shirts, their hair coiffed in perfect curls.

And every single one of them glared at her when she walked in.

When Jethren appeared behind her, a few leapt to their feet, weapons drawn.

“I’m gonna enjoy this,” Seaworth drawled, lounging on the deck like a cat, flipping his knife over and over in his hand.

Grace looked around for help, but Jax, Salt, and Dominya were still not back from their expedition. Tabitha, the Tree woman who occasionally let Grace borrow her makeup and perfume, was watching her closely, but she didn’t say anything.

Grace made herself as tall as she could. “I need to speak to the captain.”

Seaworth made as if to throw his knife, and she flinched, while Tabitha rose from her seat, her sequined dress swishing around her. “Captain Paladin’s out looking for you,” he said. “He called us all back to make sure you weren’t hiding on the ship somewhere.”

Seaworth got to his feet and sauntered over to Grace. Her hand went to her sword, and she felt Jethren just behind her.

“What if I told him you accidentally fell overboard?” Seaworth said softly. “What if I told him this filthy Daarthurian kidnapped you, and we were too late? Wouldn’t that be...tragic.”

“I’ll tell him the truth,” Jethren said.

Seaworth looked him up and down, then laughed. “I’ll deal with you later, Daarthurian. I heard some very powerful people are looking for you.”

Jethren seemed to shrink inside his robes, but he didn’t back down. There was silence, then Seaworth laughed.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Seaworth said.

“You’re shielded.” Jethren said. “How?”

“You aren’t the first Daarthuurian I’ve disagreed with.” Seaworth said.

“Enough.” Grace snapped. “You know Captain Paladin can spot a liar faster than Crow can spot pursuit. You’d never make it off this ship alive if you hurt me. He made that clear when you took me on.”

“He’s not going to be captain forever.”

“But he’s captain now,” a voice said, stepping forward.

“Tabitha,” Grace said, trying not to sound too relieved. “Sorry to spoil your evening.”

“Not to worry, girl.” Tabitha swept her hair out of her face. “There was too much scum in the bars for it to be worth it anyway. Besides,” she looked Seaworth up and down. “I’m always up for a little brawl.” She twisted her wrists, and blades sprung out of the metal cuffs on her wrists. “Get away from the girl, Seaworth, or I’ll stick one of these up your nose.”

Seaworth laughed, but he took a step back. “You could never take me, and you know it. You don’t have it in you.”

“You don’t know anything about me,”

“Do I?” His eyes glinted, and Tabitha looked even angrier. She stepped forward, so that she was face to face. “Give me a reason,” she whispered. “I’ve been waiting all this time.”

They were still glaring at each other when a voice boomed “GRACE O’MALLEY. CABIN. NOW.”

Grace winced. Paladin stood atop the gangplank, silhouetted impressively against the two moons, his long coat whooshing behind him in the breeze.

“Captain Paladin, Sir,” she began. “This is my apprentice, Je--”

“When did I say you could take on an apprentice?”

Grace looked down. “You didn’t”

“Right. And who has the authority to add members to our crew?”

“You do.”

“And only me. Come on. Kid,” he nodded at Jethren, “You come too.”

*I’m starting to think I’m better off with the Navy.*

*I promised I’d help you. You have to trust me.*

*Because that has worked out so well so far.*

“SEAWORTH.” Captain Paladin shouted, jolting Grace and Jethren out of their exchange.

“Yes, Captain?” the first mate’s voice oozed confidence.

“All members of the crew are family. You attack my family, what happens?”

Seaworth mumbled something.

“I’m sorry?”

“You get thrown out in space, Captain,” he stared the captain down, eyes never leaving his face. Tabitha stepped back to the crowd of crewmembers she’d been with, shooting Seaworth a derisive glance as she did so.

Paladin stepped around the children, looming over Seaworth with all of his impressive height. “You can’t learn that rule, I’ll fill your position with a crew member who can.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Tabitha!”

“Captain?”

He looked at her for a long moment, from the long dress to the knives that still extended from her wrists. “You look nice.”

Tabitha grinned. “Thank you, sir.”

Seaworth muttered something again.

“What was that, First Mate?” Paladin asked.

“Nothing, Captain.”

“You sure there isn’t something you want to share with the class?”

“Yes, Captain. There isn’t anything, Captain.”

“Good. Organize a scrubbing of the deck. None of you are going out tonight. You can thank Grace for that.”

“I don’t wanna hear it,” he said over the collective groan. “You have work to do anyway. We’ve got a new shipment coming in tonight, and we’re out tomorrow.”

“But we just delivered the last one. Can’t we have a break?” someone called.

“When has this ever been a democracy?” Paladin glared. “Get to work. We leave at dawn.”

He swept toward the stairs, beckoning for Grace and Jethren to follow.

In the captain’s quarters, Paladin sealed the door shut and glared at Grace. “Well?”

Grace spoke fast, talking quickly so as to be done with the uncomfortable moment as quickly as possible.

When she got to the part about Jethren speaking to her mind, Paladin’s face started to go red, and a vein pulsed in his temple. “You’re a telepath?” he asked.

Jethren looked at him blankly.



“Boy? Can you hear me?”

He blinked. “Sorry. I was trying to project into your mind.”

“I can’t hear anything but the monotony of my own thoughts, kid, just like most of us humans. Only a few of us have the ability to even be open to mental manipulation, much less communication.”

“Is that why Grace is on your crew? Captain?” he added hastily.

“Grace is on my crew because it’s none of your business. But yes, it is an added bonus.”

“Wait, how did you know---” Grace interjected.

“You need to shut the Hell up and listen for once. I could have you thrown off the ship for what you’ve pulled tonight.”

Grace swallowed. If she was thrown off the *Sea Queen*...

How long would it take someone to notice a human girl who matched the description the Navy still sent out?

How long until they found her?

Captain Paladin looked at Jethren. “Your Highness,” he said. “It’s an honor, I suppose.”

Jethren, for once, was speechless. “How did you--”

“Sailors are looking for a Daarthuurian boy matching your description. And I’m not an idiot. You’d better keep that royal insignia hidden.”

Suddenly, Grace remembered where she’d seen that amulet before. The symbol was tacked up all over the place, on flyers and posters, even graffitied on the walls.

“You’re--” she began.

“I thought I told you to be quiet,” Paladin snapped. “Yes, your little apprentice is the heir to the Daarthuurian throne, and the symbol of the planet’s resistance. How did you manage to escape?”

“They think that I’m mute, and by extension dumb, so they got careless. I’ve been trying to communicate with my people for over a month, but it’s like I can’t get through. There’s something blocking them. Grace heard me when I was making a routine call.”

Paladin frowned. “Your people can’t hear you because the Navy is making all Daarthurians submit to ‘testing’ once a week. I gather that it’s so that you can’t use your telepathic abilities.”

Jethren was looking at the captain like he’d never seen anything quite like him before. “And how do you know this? You’re just a pirate.”

“I make it my business to know things. I don’t like surprises.” He pressed button behind his desk, and a news screen descended from the ceiling. “They’re already looking for you. They’re saying you’ve been kidnapped by pirates.”

“Pirates?” Jethren jolted at the image of himself on the screen. “But how do they--”

Paladin touched the screen, and it zoomed to an image of Grace, standing over the bodies of the guards. From far away, it looked as though she was threatening Jethren as she brandished her sword.

“They’re looking for both of you at every port, and it’s only a matter of time before one of our crew let slip that a young human girl has been cleaning their cabins for the past few days. That’s why we’re leaving. Without pay, I might add. I don’t have time to meet up with the Postmaster tonight.”

“I apologize for any inconvenience I might have caused,” Jethren said. “I can assure you that the Royal House of Daarthuur will fully compensate you for saving my life and the future of my kingdom. When I am restored to the throne--”

“Kid, your House is destroyed. Your government is either imprisoned or dead, and your Resistance is composed of a few former servants with a knack for getting out of trouble. You’re finished.”

“I will restore the planet to the power of its people,” Jethren said. “I swore a vow.”

“The vows of boys mean nothing. You’ll only get yourself killed.”

Jethren bowed his head for a long moment. Grace glanced at Paladin, angry at him for provoking the boy, but the captain didn’t even look at her. His gaze remained fixed on Jethren. Calculating.

Finally, Jethren looked up, meeting Paladin’s gaze determinedly. “So what do you suggest?”

“Grace has extended our protection to you. The Navy is going to come for us either way. Leave tonight, and live a little longer.”

“Live with pirates?” Jethren spat. “Smuggling drugs, weapons, and other filth throughout the galaxy? Murdering and pillaging? I would rather die!”

“That’s not what you said earlier,” Grace muttered.

“You will die if you don’t come with us. And don’t believe all the stories your mother told you.” Captain Paladin looked more amused than offended by Jethren’s outburst.

“I would rather die than disgrace the integrity of my nation with such an action,” Jethren sneered.

Captain Paladin looked at him for a long moment. “An organized retreat is not cowardice. It at least might buy you time to amass an army and retake the planet.”

“I don’t see how abandoning my people to take up with pirates will make anyone sympathetic to my cause.”

“Your planet isn’t the only one chafing under the Navy. If we can get you to meet up with others who have been wronged by Admiral Lee--”

“There is no hope for anyone who resists the Navy. Everyone knows that.”

“Then you won’t have anything to lose by coming with us,” Paladin said. “It’s not ideal, but--”

“Not ideal? You expect me to become a common criminal, hoping to come back one day? As if there would be any planet left to save.”

Jethren went silent, but Grace could feel his mind whirring. For a moment, she caught a flash of the tower from earlier, with flames licking out of the turret. A sickening surge of grief went through her.

“You will return one day.” Paladin said finally. “But nothing is to be gained from fighting back now, where the Navy has destroyed any semblance of real resistance. You will only get your people killed. Killed for protecting a prince who won’t do whatever is necessary to protect them.”

Jethren flinched.

Paladin pressed his advantage. “Come with us.”

Jethren sighed. “The Navy already knows that I left in the company of pirates. They will kill me. Nowhere in the galaxy is safe from their might. And they will kill all of you, for knowing me.”

Captain Paladin, smiled, recognizing his victory. “They cannot kill you if you are already dead, Your Highness.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Seaworth asked.

“Are you really questioning me? Again?” Captain Paladin’s voice thundered over the comm, and Grace winced at the malice in it. “I should have dumped you with the garbage.”

Seaworth sighed. “I just don’t see why the girl has to do it.”

“Because she found the boy, and this is her problem. And because I’m the captain, and what I say goes. Keep up with the insubordination, and you won’t be alive to complain.”

“Yes, Captain.” He checked the harnesses holding Grace. “Are you ready?”

Grace reached up to touch her hair, marveling at the purple that came away on her fingers. She still couldn’t believe the person she’d seen in the mirror was her. In her black body armor, cat eyeliner, and purple hair and hat with its feathered plume, she looked five years older, and formidable. A little ridiculous.

She looked like someone who would have no problem getting away with killing a prince.

“I still don’t see why we can’t just fake you lighting him up with a phaser,” Grace had said stubbornly, as Tabitha and Paladin applied the last of her makeup. “Why all the theatrics?”

“Stop asking questions.” he snapped. “It’s going to ruin your lipstick.”

Grace rolled her eyes.

Tabitha giggled.

“Remember what I told you when you go out there,” Paladin said. “Seaworth is just insurance. I don’t want anyone seeing him unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“And I need you to sell it. The last thing we need is the Navy on our tails. We’ll never get a job again.”

“Won’t they come after us if they know we’ve killed the prince anyway?”

“Hardly,” said Paladin. “They already wanted him dead. They’re not going to try very hard.”

Tabitha narrowed her eyes. “Something tells me this isn’t the first time you’ve done something like this, Captain.”

“Someone who asks questions like that gets put on latrine duty.”

“Sor-ry.” Tabitha muttered.

Grace checked the straps on her jet pack for the twentieth time, blinking at the weighty feel of her eyelashes.

She could practically feel her hands vibrating with nerves, and it didn’t help that Dominya was watching her.

Dominya’s lips were pulled into a frown, and her eyes were roving up and down Grace’s body.

“Don’t tell me,” Grace said, finally walking over to her, even though it made her stomach jolt uncomfortably. Being with Dominya always felt like this. Like standing on the edge of a cliff and leaning forward. “This is a bad idea.”

“You look...pretty.” Dominya said, a blush darkening her purple cheeks.

Grace winked, a sudden surge of confidence racing through her.

“These jet packs will work, right?” she asked teasingly.

“Pleides invented them.” Dominya scowled, and Grace leaned in to kiss her cheek.

*Cute.* Jethren’s sarcasm was visible even in telepathic form. *Are you in love with her?*

*Can you hear everything I’m thinking?’*

*Only what you’re thinking very--loudly.*

*You’d better be worth this.*

*When I am restored to the throne, you’ll get the biggest palace--*

*No.*

*No?*

*I just want a ship. And a crew. And no one telling me what to do.* She could feel the grief and anger flashing at the edge of her thoughts, and Jethren was silent for a moment as he digested it.

*The best ship the Daarthurians can build.* He finally said. *It’s yours.*

*Good.*

Grace flipped the on switch for the jetpack. Before Jethren could say anything else, she ran down the gangplank and leaped into the air.

They hovered over the docks in full view of the fortress, the air speeder vibrating beneath them.

They’d already drawn the attention of a crowd. There were a few sailors at the edge of it, watching the commotion with their arms crossed. They must have known who Jethren was by now, but they hadn’t intervened.

But that didn't mean they wouldn't.

Grace drew her sword, smiling as the blade glowed purple, matching her hair and hat perfectly. "You knew this was coming," she said in a sing-song voice.

"Please, don't hurt me," Jethren protested, eyes wide, arms held out so that his long sleeves billowed around him in the breeze. He tried to reach her hand, but Grace slashed with her sword, and he drew it back just in time to keep his fingers from being severed. "I just want to go back home."

"Your people offered no ransom." Grace grabbed Jethren with one hand and hurled him to the floor. She stood over him, her eyes wild with triumph.

Jethren's eyes went wide. "Please," his voice was choked and quiet, but Grace knew that her audio recording devices would pick up every word. "Granuaile." He whispered.

Grace leaned down and yanked off his amulet, holding it up for the crowd. Her sword remained at his throat, and Jethren swallowed. *You're making this really convincing.*

Grace smiled.

In the coming years, people would say that this was when Granuaile first emerged. The legendary defeat of the sailors to protect Dominya and today's execution would grow and warp in the minds of those who heard it, spreading and embellishing the tale until it caught up the entire galaxy.

Even if it took several more years for Granuaile to become the Pirate Queen, this was the beginning.

She gave one final swipe, and Jethren's head departed his shoulders. The pieces, along with the speeder, fell into the abyss.



And Granuaile activated her jet pack and flew clear, laughing and dodging the hastily fired blasters of the sailors as she did so.

“Great job, Gracie,” Paladin said into her comm. “Now get on the ship. We’re out of here.”

Grace flew into *The Sea Queen*’s hold, the door rattling shut behind her. Before any of the Navy could begin their pursuit, the ship had disappeared into hyperspace.

## CHAPTER XIII

### ELIZABETH

**May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2051**

#### **Andua**

Grace was practically bouncing. She'd never been here, never even known that you *could* be here. She would have thought Paladin had been joking about their destination, if he'd had a sense of humor.

Andua's land mass was almost completely covered in dense tropical rainforest. A single, vast ocean stretched over the rest of the planet, bluer than the ones on Earth. The rivers that wound through the landscape were a deep blue-green, snakelike zigzags that broke up the verdant monotony.

What was better than all that landscape, all that lush beauty, was what was missing. Not a single gleam of silver. Not a single belch of industrial smoke, or the industrial wasteland that marked most of Earth.

Andua was uninhabitable.

It was the only place the Navy hadn't conquered. The only place where even Admiral Lee's civilizing arm had failed. Andua's forest was legend, a tale whispered all over the galaxy.

Entire armies were dispatched into the forest, armed with flamethrowers and chainsaws.

They never came out.

The sailors had tried aerial attacks, carving swaths of burning foliage through the forest. Charcoal scars stretched across the planet.

But by the time the ships descended, the dense foliage had somehow reappeared, and the ships couldn't land without getting caught in their cloying branches.

Those sailors were also never heard from again.

Eventually, Admiral Lee had decided to cut his losses and pull out of the region. With the impossible undergrowth, the saltwater ocean and rivers, and the lack of even what seemed to be an intelligent population, the Navy left Andua alone.

Grace had tried to ask Paladin what they needed from Andua. What theft, what riches, what trades—were to be found in a place like Andua? The only thing they'd do was burn fuel.

But Paladin hadn't been open to much conversation since Grace had brought Jethren aboard. He still glared at her whenever she moved around him to sweep his office, or handed out biscuits in the mess hall.

Paladin *was* talking to Jethren. They'd sit in his office for hours. Every time they emerged, Jethren looked exhausted, and Paladin remained expressionless. Grace always asked Jethren what the talks were about, but he would only say, "It's royal business."

As if that mattered anymore.

As they descended through the thick layer of clouds, Grace had first glimpse of Andua up close. She climbed into the rigging, leaning out so that she could look through the now-transparent dome as the planet unfurled below.

But even though the sight was impressive, Grace kept glancing at the navigations consoles. How would Paladin get through the planet's dense undergrowth? Where would they land?

The ship banked, running parallel with the coastline, and Grace nearly lost her balance.

*We're here to talk to Queen Elizabeth.*

*Who?*

*The descendent of the family that once ruled the galaxy in peace, before the Navy took over.*

*So she's—*

*The rightful queen of the galaxy.*

Grace nearly fell out of the rigging in shock as a million whispered tales went through her mind. *The Tudors are real?*

*The Rebellion is real, Grace.* She could see Jethren smiling up at her, his head barely level with Paladin's elbow. *Sorry we had to keep it from you for this long.*

Grace thought of her parents. If the rebellion was real, did that mean they were really a part of it? Would Elizabeth know? And what did that mean for Grace?

*The queen killed my parents. I don't want any part of it.*

*The Navy killed your parents.* Jethren corrected. She'd filled him in on the details after the first night, when they both kept waking to nightmares of a palace burning and blood blossoming over bedsheets.

Jethren had lost control of his projections, and Grace had dreamed his nightmares with him. Paladin was helping her work to shield her mind while she slept, but it was a slow process.

Besides, it was too late for her to forget what she'd seen.

*They were trying to save the galaxy.* Jethren said. *That's why the Navy killed them.*

Grace shook her head. She climbed down from the rigging and leapt the last few feet to the deck.

When she landed, Jax bumped her with his elbow. He nodded at her sword, "No weapons in the presence of the queen." Jax said. "She doesn't like newcomers."

“Well, I’m not a huge fan of her either.” Grace took her sword off her belt and handed it to Jax. He clipped it onto his belt.

Before Grace could ask him any more questions, a jolt went through the ship. Grace’s stomach rose into her throat. The ship had started its descent.

“Where are we landing?” Grace whispered, but Jax didn’t answer. Collision warnings flashed across the screens as the ship descended into the impenetrable canopy, but Paladin simply directed the navigations crew to stay the course.

Finally, when the ship’s Anti-Collision protocol halted it automatically, Paladin grabbed the joystick and took over flight controls.

Vines and branches from the nearest trees began to hit the hull of the ship with swishes and clatters. Leaves covered the windows as Grace rushed to the captain’s side, in spite of Seaworth’s accompanying hiss of disapproval. “Captain—”

But before she could say anything else, the trees disappeared.

Below them was a deep green field, stretching into the tree line in either direction.

It housed a small air traffic station. People flowed in and out of it like a river, rushing to the docked vessels all over the field. Other tiny figures disappeared into the forest.

It was an airport.

“But Andua isn’t populated!” Grace said aloud.

“It is now.” Paladin said. He turned to the crew that was gathered around him, his eyes meeting each and every one of theirs. “Taking you beyond this boundary makes you part of the Rebellion. You know what that means.”

Grace gulped, but Seaworth’s face was impassive. “Can we get on with it?” He asked. “I’m hungry.”

“I have business,” Paladin went on. “Be back in two hours.” There was a soft thump as the ship landed, and then the hatch opened.

Tabitha had already been coiffing her hair while Paladin spoke. Before Grace could ask her any questions, she rushed out in a whirl of sequins and silk.

“Grace, Jethren, you’re with me.”

“What about me?” Seaworth asked.

“Do I look like I care what you do?”

“I’m the First Mate.”

“As you never fail to remind me.”

“I should know what our missions are, in case anything happens to you.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” Paladin said. “And you’re pissing me off. Go.”

Seaworth stalked away, catching up with Tabitha down the field. He threw his arm around her waist, and Tabitha leaned into him for a moment before pulling away.

Grace frowned after them, but she didn’t have time to do more than puzzle over their interaction before she, Jethren, and Paladin descended the ramp, and her boots touched the soil of Andua for the first time.

Grace took a deep breath.

The air was sweeter here, richer. It was oppressively humid, and she could hear the cacophony of the surrounding forest over even the roar of other ships’ engines. She watched as a man dressed in a black Navy uniform dashed across to his ship and took off into the sky.

“Spies for us.” Paladin said at her quizzical expression. “ You don’t get to know anything else.”

Grace's mind spiraled into a whirl of speculation. If the Rebellion had sailors, then it would make sense for them to have infiltrated the lower levels as well.

Like the police force.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her hand. "Grace."

Dominya had rushed down the gangplank, her hands still greasy from the engine room.

"Where are you going?"

Grace shrugged. "Somewhere with Paladin and Jethren."

Dominya's brow furrowed. "I thought we were going to explore together."

Grace winced. "I know. I'm sorry—but it's captain's orders."

"No problem." Dominya looked down.

"Grace! Sometime today would be nice!" Paladin and Jethren waited at the edge of the trees.

"I have to go," Grace said. "Is everything okay?"

Dominya looked like she was about to say something, then seemed to decide against it.

"It's nothing. I'll see you when you get back."

"Okay." Grace leaned in for a kiss, but Dominya had already rushed back up the gangplank.

Grace jogged over to Paladin and Jethren. "Sorry, Captain."

Paladin rolled his eyes. "Teenagers."

Paladin moved through the forest with a quick, unhurried stride, not even bothering to check that Grace and Jethren were keeping pace.

*Can you sense Elizabeth?*

*Everyone's shielded here, or they're humans without telepathic ability.* Jethren replied.

*You're quite unusual, you know.*

Grace sighed. She'd rather know about the fight before she got into it.

What if Elizabeth lied to her? What if her parents had been innocent?

The rainforest was dark, as though they'd stepped instantly from midday to dusk. Grace had to squint to see the shapes of branches. After a few minutes as the darkness deepened, Paladin got out his flashlight.

Jethren seemed distracted. He stumbled constantly, snagging his white t-shirt on a branch so that it tore.

"Quiet!" Paladin hissed.

"Why?" Grace asked. "What's in here?"

Both ignored her, but Jethren said, "I'm sorry. It's just...overwhelming."

*Why is it overwhelming?*

No answer.

*Jethren Song, if you don't tell me something right now, I'm tying you to a tree and leaving you here.*

There was a pause. Then, *This forest has a lot of...creatures.*

*You can sense them?*

*Animals are always easier to detect. And these are...particularly vicious. And large.*

*Great.*



Grace was summoning the courage to ask how close they were when Paladin stopped, holding out a hand as Grace nearly bumped into him. “Wait. I think it’s—” he walked in a small circle, touching each of the trees, his eyes closed.

Grace took a step back, and a twig snapped under her feet. “Captain?” Are you feeling okay?”

Paladin just shook his head, his arms held out wide around him, reaching for the leaves and discarding them. “I always forget. Ah. Yes.” His hand grasped on something in the air, and he pulled it as if it were a lever.

A door appeared just in front of him. Dark wood, with a curling iron grate around it. As Grace watched, the door creaked open. A curl of bright yellow light fell onto Paladin’s face, illuminating it.

They walked into the light.

The floor was a dark brown wood, and book cases surrounded them on all sides. Some books were regular paperbacks, some had leather covers, and others even the scrolls that Grace remembered from her ancient history books.

‘Welcome to the Elizabethan Library,’ scrolled across the screens on the walls.

“This is...nice.” Grace said, as the door slammed shut behind them.

“Yeah.” Jethren said, weaving his way through the chairs and couches. A high, straight-backed chair and oak desk sat at the front atop a dais. Papers were strewn all over it.

He walked up to the desk, leaning down to inspect the papers. “These are...battle plans?”

At his words, the paper sunk into the wood and disappeared.

Jethren leaped back. “What the Hell was that?”

“My secrets are my secrets, even for you, Your Highness.” The voice came from one of the bookcases. Grace could make out a shadowy figure behind the shelves. The voice was clear and strong, clipped. Like she was used to being taken seriously.

“Your Majesty?” Jethren asked.

“Elizabeth will be just fine,” the voice said. “I assume you’re here to talk to me about your parents.”

Jethren started to reply, but before he did, Paladin said, “His whole planet is done. Family’s dead. People enslaved by the Navy.”

“I know.” Elizabeth didn’t sound sympathetic. “I had one of ours comm me as soon as Lee finalized the mission.”

“So why didn’t you come help?” Grace interjected. “Why did you just watch?”

“Granuaile,” Elizabeth said, her voice faintly amused. “I have heard a great deal about you since Jethren escaped. Some are even calling *you* the future queen.”

“It was just makeup,” Grace said. “People exaggerate.”

There was a soft laugh, with no amusement in it. “That they do.”

“Are you gonna hide behind those bookshelves the entire time?”

There was a beat, during which Paladin glared at Grace. Then she emerged.

Grace and Jethren were both silent for a moment. Paladin sighed.

“You’re the queen? But you’re just a kid!” Grace finally blurted. The queen looked to be about sixteen, nearly the same age as Grace. She wore a white long-sleeve shirt tucked into jeans and high-heeled boots. She had a thigh holster with what looked like a standard blaster attached to it.

*This* was the leader of the Rebellion? The person for whom her parents had died?

“My parents were murdered by Lee and his friends.” Elizabeth’s mouth was a firm line, and her green eyes glittered. “I am the last of my line. I apologize that my ascension was at an inconvenient age.”

“Sorry.” Grace muttered.

Elizabeth ignored her. “Did you bring in the shipment?”

“Seaworth is unloading it now,” Paladin said.

Elizabeth’s hand went down to her blaster. She ran her fingers across it before she said, “There might be more—deliveries you have to make in the future.”

Paladin nodded, while Grace and Jethren exchanged confused glances. Weren’t they just talking about weapons, money, and supplies? Why talk in code in front of them?

Jethren got it before Grace did. “Who else is Lee going after?”

Elizabeth sighed, and Grace felt a stab of dislike for her. She made her way over to the wall behind the dais, , where a map of the galaxy was spread out across a single enormous screen.

“The red planets are under Lee’s rule.” Elizabeth said, her hand passing over them. “The yellow ones are his reported targets, according to our spies.” She identified further arrays of planets, some as far away as several solar systems from Earth. “And these have already surrendered and paid tribute.” She ran her hand over a few bright green planets.”

“Not much neutral territory anymore,” Paladin said. “That makes it difficult for me.”

Elizabeth nodded, “From now on, it can’t just be about keeping out of the Republic’s territory, or fleeing out of their reach. You’ll have to be running constantly, never staying in a place for long, hitting them before they can summon backup.”

Paladin rubbed his chin. "I'll have a harder time getting back to you if I have to shake them off."

"That's alright," Elizabeth said. "I'm setting you up with checkpoints here, here and here," She highlighted a few spaces next to Earth, Pluto, and Mars 9. "Get it to one of my messengers there, and you'll have fulfilled your obligation."

"What if we get into trouble?" Grace asked. "Will the Rebellion help us?"

Elizabeth's green eyes narrowed on hers, seeming to take her in for the first time. "You're one to talk about youth," she said softly.

"Your Majesty." Paladin began. "Granuaile is Grace O'Malley."

Elizabeth's teeth stretched across her face into a wide, almost feral grin. "The O'Malleys? Patricia and Mac? Lawrence?"

Grace didn't know why her parents' names in Elizabeth's mouth made her so angry. "They died because they were working for the rebellion. I nearly died, too."

Elizabeth twirled a gold ring around her finger as she said, "I heard you took down the chief of police without a weapon. And with your murder of the crown prince of Daarthuur...you'll prove extraordinarily useful."

"I won't be *useful* to anyone." Grace spat. "And no one else is supposed to know about my family."

Elizabeth's eyes flicked to Paladin. "That seems counterproductive."

"She insisted."

"Why?" Elizabeth tipped her head to the side. "Your family is dead. Surely you aren't protecting anyone?"

"None of your business," Grace's eyes met Elizabeth's, willing herself not to blink.

Elizabeth looked away first. “Fine. I will not reveal your true identity as long as it does not present a direct benefit to the Crown.”

“That’s not a promise!”

Elizabeth gave a condescending smile that made Grace want to attack her. “Your parents understood this, and you will, too. This is the best I can do.”

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## **The Academy**

### **Los Angeles, Earth**

**May 4, 2051**

“Elizabeth Tudor,” Captain Icho paced, his boots sharp and insistent against the hard tile floor.

Caleb hated it when teachers did this. It always made him feel exposed and vulnerable, like he was being watched.

“The first in line for the Galactic Throne, the only surviving member of the royal family.

“Wow.” Hal said quietly. “She’s hot.”

“Cadet Kellan!” Icho barked, and the boy jumped. “What did you say?”

“Nothing, sir.” Kellan stammered. “I was just—”

There was a whistling noise by Caleb’s ear, and then the soft thud of a blow. Icho had hit Hal in the back with the hilt of his cutlass.

Once he got past them, Hal looked across his desk at Caleb. *Still hot*, he mouthed.

Caleb had to hide his smile in his sleeve.

“The Rebellion is constantly on the move,” Icho said. “No one person, apart from Elizabeth, holds all the secrets. Elizabeth wants to establish a dictatorship like the monarchies of

the past, to strip us of our human rights. Naturally, her propaganda veers in the opposite direction. She claims that we are the tyrants,” he laughed, and the cadets joined in awkwardly.

*Kill me*, Hal mouthed at Caleb.

Caleb’s laughter sounded a little too legitimate.

Sirens blared throughout the dormitory. Caleb bolted upright, the remnants of a dream that had involved Grace and a lot of red hair lingering in his brain. “What’s going on?”

Hal was already pulling on his boots. “Be in the drill field in two minutes with all your gear on, or we get latrine duty.” He tossed a boot at Caleb.

Caleb pulled it on hastily, then leapt down from his bunk, landing awkwardly and hunting about for his other one. Luckily, his father had warned him about these late-night drills, so he was already dressed in most of his gear. He found the other boot and pulled it on, then dashed into the barracks’ hallway, pushing through the mass of sleepy cadets.

The drill field was wet and a little muddy from the earlier rain, and the air was cold and damp. Wisps of fog reached through the assembling cadets, muffling the jangling of belts still being buckled and the jostling of over a thousand cadets jockeying for position.

“What do you think this is?” Hal asked.

“Some kind of drill.”

Caleb was right. It wasn’t long before Captain Icho and the other squad leaders were leading the cadets in push-ups, jumping jacks, and sprints across the field.

Caleb's squad was sent to the obstacle course. There was virtually no light on the area, and what light there was cast shadows over the structures, messing with his depth perception. Caleb sustained a deep scratch near his eye because of it, and Hal was saved from accidentally plummeting down a scaling wall by Caleb's hand on his shoulder.

When they emerged from the obstacle course, covered in mud and panting, it was to have General Icho direct them into rocky trails and cliffs surrounding the Academy. "Take up positions at the South side of the camp. We're playing Capture the Flag."

Caleb gulped. His father had told him about Capture the Flag. It was much more deadly than the way he had played it at school.

When they arrived at the statue of Admiral Lee that marked the South side, Captain Andrews handed each of them a set of weapons. Because Capture the Flag was an exercise in hand to hand combat and stealth, Andrews only had cutlasses and broadswords. At least none of them crackled with plasma or electricity, like the ones the Navy typically gave to sailors. But the edges were sharp, and deadly.

"You've got to be kidding me," Hal said.

Caleb shook his head. "Didn't your parents warn you about this first?"

"My parents died in a car accident when I was three," Hal said. "So, no."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks for bringing that up."

Caleb looked at him. He was grinning. Caleb shook his head.

Once they received their weapons, Captain Andrews gathered them all in a circle. She was a short woman with closely cropped dark hair, but she commanded attention. Caleb had seen her sparring with Icho.

She'd kicked his ass in under ten seconds flat.

She pulled a green strip of cloth from beneath her jacket. "This is your flag. You have to hide it somewhere on this side, and you have to put a guard around it. Who wants to guard?"

Silence.

"That's what I thought," Andrews said grimly. "But defense is as good as offense. Spiro, Workman!" She barked, and the two cadets jumped. "How would you defend the flag?"

Spiro, a shrimpy boy with glasses, gulped at being addressed directly. "I'd probably hide it in a tree or someplace. Where it would blend in and not be easily seen."

"And where would you place your guards?"

Spiro frowned. "Underneath the tree?"

"Lying in wait," Caleb interrupted. "To attack while any of the enemy were distracted scaling the tree."

"Cadet Lewis." Andrews' mouth twisted as she said his name. "I don't remember asking for your opinion."

"I was just--"

"You are no longer involved in our planning."

"That's ridiculous!" Hal protested. "That was a good idea!"

"Don't—" Caleb muttered, but it was too late. "I see that you also don't have a problem with insubordination, Cadet Kellan. You are on your own as well. Now get out of my sight."

Hal opened his mouth to argue, but Caleb grabbed him by the arm and hauled him away before he could.

"She's totally out of line!" Hal said. "Your answer was right!"



“Just because I memorized the manual doesn’t mean I should show it off to everybody.” Caleb said. “Dad told me that being his son might make them harder on me. I’m supposed to be keeping my head down.”

“Right. Because keeping your head down is going to get you a ship.” Hal shook his head.

They walked on in silence until they saw a few figures silhouetted against the floodlights.

“I have an idea.” Hal said. “Let’s get the flag.”

“Two of us? Against all of them?” Caleb gestured toward the North side of camp, where the mass of the other team was slowly forming up into a wall of black uniforms. “We should just climb a tree until it’s all over.”

“Come on, it’ll be easier to sneak around them if they don’t see us coming.”

“They’re going to see us coming! That’s the game.”

Hal shook his head. “Come on, think about it. Those people behind us are new cadets. What do you think is gonna be their first idea when it comes to capturing the flag?”

And Caleb knew, because it had been his first idea. He’d presented it to his father, right before the Commander had smacked him around the head for coming up with something so stupid. “They’re gonna try an all-out frontal assault,” Caleb said.

“Which is exactly what the North side is doing right now,” Hal said.

Caleb eyed them, the growing dark shadows that they cast across the lawn as they advanced to the corresponding silhouettes of the South side in the trees.

“Seems like they’re creating a diversion for us.” Caleb said.

Hal grinned. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

The other team had hung the red flag out over one of the bluffs that extended toward the North side of the campus. It was a clever move—you'd have to go across a stretch of open ground to reach the flag, or scale a rocky cliff in the dark.

Caleb and Hal sat against a tree, just before the stretch of ground, watching one of the sentries pace back and forth.

"Come on," Hal muttered. "Come on."

But the sounds of fighting as the two forces clashed didn't seem to sway the cadet. She just kept pacing, kicking a rock or two occasionally. At the sound of a shrill scream, she stiffened, her hand going to one of the daggers at her waist.

Caleb had seen her throw those daggers before. There was no way they wanted her to spot them.

"We need to draw her away somehow," Hal said. "She'll down us before we get within ten feet of her."

Caleb wiped a hand across his brow. The humidity was making him sweat in spite of the chill, and his mind felt sluggish.

*Come on, he thought. Think.*

Then he remembered.

They'd been talking about a battle plan, and Grace had insulted his pincer maneuver.

*She guided the attack arrows up underneath the ship. Before the ship's defenders could turn, the shields were down and the ship had been destroyed. "Way better," Grace had said.*

*"Less damage, less risk. You always forget the battle field is 360 degrees."*

*"That's not how Dad's manual says to do it."*

*Grace rolled her eyes. "What does that matter? It worked, didn't it?"*

“We might as well go at her. Maybe she’ll chase after one of us.” Hal got up, but Caleb pulled him down again. “Come on.”

They backtracked through the woods, making a huge circle back to the bluff. “Where are we going?” Hal hissed, but Caleb didn’t answer. They had to find a place to climb to the flag. Somewhere easily accessible, but hidden. Somewhere like—

“Yes!” Caleb rushed to the edge of the bluff, pointing at a gap between two rocks. “There.”

There was a fissure that split the rocks, descending down the bluff for about ten feet until it leveled out into a ledge that led directly to the enemy flag.

“Come on.” Caleb said. He started to lower himself into the fissure.

“I don’t like heights.”

“We are training to fight in space.”

“And I don’t like heights.”

“Well, you can either stay there and wait for someone to slaughter you, or come and save the day. Which is it?”

Hal was silent for a moment. Caleb continued to lower himself, making sure he had secure handholds before going further down. Finally, Hal said. “You’re lucky you’re getting your own ship. I wouldn’t risk my life for just anyone.”

Caleb scoffed as he landed on the ledge, his boots slipping slightly on the waxy, smooth texture of the rock. “What makes you think I’m getting my own ship?”

“Just being optimistic,” Hal said airily, but Caleb could feel his voice shaking.

Hal's hands shook as he grabbed each handhold. When he finally made it to the ledge, he was deathly pale.

The flag was hanging about twenty feet above them and fifty feet to the left. "You wanna do the honors?" Caleb asked.

Hal turned a sickly green color, and he seemed to be physically keeping himself from vomiting as he said, "Fuck. Off."

Caleb laughed, then walked along the ledge until he was directly below the flag.

Luckily, this area wasn't as steep as the others. There were natural handholds in the rock, and several small ledges where he could rest.

Caleb took a deep breath, reached for the first one, and started to climb.

At the bottom, Hal kept a lookout.

"You're good." He whispered to Caleb, as he kept climbing. You're—stop!"

"What?" Caleb said. He was holding himself with one arm and leg bent, and the position made his thighs and arms shake.

"Don't move until I give the signal." Hal started to climb back up the fissure, pulling himself up the incline like a monkey.

"Scared of heights?" Caleb gritted his teeth.

Silence. Caleb's thighs and arms shook. He closed his eyes, willing himself to hold on.

"Hal. Hal?"

Silence. Then:

"INCOMING!" The voice was Hal's, tinged with humor and hysteria. Before Caleb could process what had been said, he heard a soft *thunk* and then a grunt of pain.

"Hal--?"

Caleb's arms were about to give out. He'd have to risk it.

Caleb hauled himself up until he was just at the edge of the bluff, then looked over.

Nothing.

It could be a trap. Caleb looked at the flag. The flagpole was metal, with rope pulleys serving as the way to raise the flag. He swiped at it experimentally with a hand, then clutched his hands around the rock as the world swam around him.

Unless he had a very specific type of arrow or blast, Caleb couldn't cut down the flag, either.

Which left....

Caleb looked at the edge of the bluff again. No footprints. No sounds other than the battle.

It was now or never.

Caleb moved.

"To Caleb Lewis!" Hal held up a bucket of Gatorade and dumped it over Caleb, who was still clutching the other team's flag, stunned.

The rest of the team applauded, and even Andrews gave Caleb a grudging pat on the back.

Before Caleb could celebrate, Icho arrived. He grabbed Caleb roughly by the collar and hauled him away, not stopping until they'd gotten to his office. The door had barely closed before Icho said, "You disobeyed a direct order."

“Technically sir, we left the planning section. As ordered. She never said we still couldn’t try to take the flag.”

CRACK.

Icho smacked Caleb across the face. “I’ll have no more excuses from you. Someone who wants to captain his own ship should learn to take responsibility for his actions.”

“Yes, sir.”

Icho raised his hand again, and Caleb willed himself not to flinch. “Good,” Icho said. “Now get out of my sight.”

Caleb saluted. Just before he closed the door, Icho said, “*The Burnside*s.”

Caleb turned around. “What?”

“Your ship.”

“But I—”

“No need for that,” Icho’s voice was short and clipped. “Your battle strategy today was creative and innovative. And your friend followed you without question. You are a captain.”

“I’m not—”

“You will be. That’s all that matters.”

CHAPTER XIV  
ADVANCED INTERROGATION

***Captain's Log December 11, 2059***

*The interrogation of Salt grows more and more difficult. I am running out of time. I am running out of excuses.*

*I must employ advanced interrogation techniques, but I am afraid.*

*And I hate that fear, because it does not spring from pity or compassion. It does not come out of any overdeveloped sense of honor.*

*It is the bare, naked truth of self-preservation.*

*Salt is hers.*

*And if I stop asking and start forcing, if I employ every trick the Academy has taught me in drawing out information, what might it do to her? If Salt came back maimed and broken? If he never came back at all?*

*More importantly, what if those techniques cause Salt to tell the truth? He saw us embrace in the hallway, and now he looks at me like he knows what I'm thinking, knows who I am to Grace.*

*He enjoys the power he holds over me, but it is a card he will play eventually. No doubt when he can inflict the most damage.*

*But time is growing short, and I cannot excuse my leniency much longer.*

*If Salt does not speak, it matters not what Grace means to me. It matters not what Salt will say before death takes him.*

*The Republic must come first.*

**December 12, 2059**

***The Burnsides***

Caleb paced back and forth across the interrogation cell, running his hands through his hair.

“You know that causes early pattern baldness, right?”

There was a muffled thump and a grunt of pain, but Caleb didn’t see Jones hit Salt again. He didn’t want to see it. Didn’t want to see the reproach in Salt’s face, the arrogance and scorn that surfaced every time Caleb directed his first mate to inflict the blows, rather than deliver them himself.

Finally, Caleb faced the young pirate. “Where is Granuaile’s next target?”

Salt’s mechanical eye darted around frantically, the only thing that betrayed his apparent composure. That, and the sickly stench that surrounded him, the bruises that mottled his face and the blood leaking from a split lip.

Caleb had ordered advanced interrogation this morning, but Salt hadn’t cracked.

When Salt had responded to yet another of Caleb’s pointed questions with a sarcastic comment, Caleb had finally snapped. He’d put all of his rage and frustration behind the blow, and Salt had sagged in his chair, unconscious.



When he awoke vomiting, Caleb was worried that he'd overstepped. If Salt couldn't give them a way to track Granuaile and *The Sea Queen*, if he couldn't give insights on the Rebellion or Elizabeth....

If Caleb was right back where he started...

He might have to turn pirate himself in order to keep his head.

"Where is *The Sea Queen*?"

Salt coughed and spat blood. He glared at Jones long enough that she looked away, then switched his gaze to Caleb.

"Space," His cracked lips bled as he smiled.

Caleb nodded at Jones, and she swung, the hilt of her cutlass connecting with Salt's shoulder. He heard a crack, and Salt screamed.

"We'll come back when he's had more time to think," Caleb said, not meeting Jones' eyes. He knew there would be reproach in them, too. Jones hated torturing prisoners.

But at the Academy, no one could pass without learning Advanced Interrogation. This type of torture was not foreign to either of them, and never had been.

They'd just been lucky enough not to need it until now.

Even though Caleb knew he could up the brutality, knew that he could tell Salt that he'd be taking off fingers and toes until he gave his friends up, leaving him without even one normal eye to function, Caleb hesitated.

What Salt said when he finally broke might be Caleb's undoing as much as Granuaile's.

It was such a wild thing, that one tiny moment together had become so much. One embrace, and their fates, which had always spiraled out in opposite directions, had become more intertwined than ever.

One moment, and the capture and death of Granuaile might mean Caleb's downfall as well.

The Republic was supposed to come first. His loyalty to his crew was supposed to come first.

And instead, Caleb found himself wishing for a loophole. A passage through the darkness, where he didn't have to make an impossible choice. Where it didn't seem like either way, Caleb would be losing some part of himself.

The bridge was bright and busy this time of day. The ship had repairs Caleb had been putting off in his mad dash across the galaxy, and the sailors always needed to keep up with their training.

The area in front of the weapons controls had been turned into a small practice field, where even on duty officers could hone their skills. One or two of them were always watching the screens, carefully scanning even reports of debris for the barest signs of life.

Caleb would not be caught off guard again.

*The Burnsides* was in Mercury's orbit. Well within Republican airspace. The closest ships were only a call away, and they could make the jump and assist in seconds.

Any type of hijacking was virtually impossible.

But that didn't make Caleb any less paranoid. He ran his hands over his wrists, where the scars from his last report had barely healed.

At the helm of the ship, Hal was lounging in a chair, chatting with a pretty Weapons Trainer with long dark hair.

At their approach, he took his feet off the desk and sat up straight, adopting an uncharacteristically grave expression.

“Nice of you to keep things running,” Jones said when she arrived, glaring at the girl until she backed away, looking terrified.

“Do you have to do that every time?” Hal asked.

“Excuse me for trying to keep the ship running.”

“Just because I don’t have a stick up my—”

“Enough.” Caleb said quietly enough for only the two of them to hear. “Are there any messages from the Commander?”

Hal checked the log. “Not yet.”

“And indication that Granuaile is following?”

Hal shook his head. “So far, no one’s anywhere within one planetary orbit of us, apart from a few traders and civilian vessels.”

Caleb shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense,” he said. “She should have come by now.”

“She’s a pirate,” Hal said. “Maybe she doesn’t care if one of her crew gets taken.”

“That’s not what she told me,” Caleb said.

“*Told you?*” Jones and Hal exclaimed at the same time.

“It’s just an expression.” Caleb said hastily.

Jones looked furious, but Hal, at least, seemed to find the answer satisfactory. “You’ve been away from home too long,” he said. “Too much Rebel propaganda around you.”

“Yeah,” Caleb didn’t meet Jones’ eyes. “Yeah. Too much propaganda.”

“Captain.” Jones’ voice brooked no compromise. “Could we speak in your office?”

“Fine.” Caleb turned to Hal. “She’s going to attack. It’s only a matter of time.”

Hal saluted as seriously as he could muster, and Caleb and Jones walked across the bridge and through the corridor beside it, neither of them speaking.

“Well?” he asked when they were alone.

Jones looked agitated and vulnerable. Her hair was frizzing out of her typically immaculate bun, and her dark eyes darted around the room. “What does Salt know about you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how you didn’t step it up until today, and even now you’re holding back.”

“I’d think you, of all people, would want me to hold back.”

“Don’t play games with me!” she snapped. “Don’t try that mind trick bullshit your father taught you, that the Academy taught us! Something’s going on.”

“Angela—”

“*Don’t.*” She moved her hand in a slicing motion. “You swore you wouldn’t lie to me with my name, Caleb. You’re my captain. More than that, you’re my best friend. You’re—”

She stopped, but her eyes met his, and Caleb felt his chest twist painfully. There was so much in them, so much he’d pretended not to see. Hope and longing. Desire.

Desire that, if he was honest, he’d experienced more often than not over the last few years.

Caleb rushed to her and grabbed her by the back of her head, pulling her against him. He brought his lips down onto hers, obliterating her. Moving in her.

Her eyelashes on his cheeks. Her tongue against his. Her head cupped in his hands.

She rose up on her tiptoes to kiss him better, fisting her hands in the fabric of his shirt and pulling him down to her. Caleb heard her gasp against his mouth, and he kissed her harder, willing himself to mean it. Willing himself to forget.

He wanted her. He'd thought about her. Angela, with her fierce light and her self-righteous tirades and the way she read his mind. The soft vulnerability she hardly ever let show.

He wanted her, he did. He willed himself to love her.

But then she stilled against him. Her muscles tensed.

She stepped back.

"No." She said quietly. "Not like this."

"I want—"

"You don't want me. Not enough to tell me the truth."

"Angela—"

"You—and Granuaile." She interrupted, and Caleb willed himself to stay calm. "You and her—something's different. You're not--right with her." Her jaw tightened.

"I—"

"No." She said again. "This isn't right. You're going to get us all killed—are you in love with her?"

"Angela—"

*"Don't call me that. Are you in love with her?"*

"No." Caleb put as much force into that one syllable as he could muster.

Jones made a choking sound. "I don't believe you."

"An—Jones!"

"No. I don't care who she is to you. I won't die for this. I won't be a pawn."

Caleb took a step closer, and she took another step back, her hand on the doorknob.

“Start cutting off fingers by tomorrow, or I will.”

Before Caleb could say anything else, she’d disappeared out the door.

He thought he heard just the hint of a sob before it slammed.

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### *The Sea Queen*

“Why aren’t we moving?” Dominya slammed the door of Grace’s office behind her.

“I’m working on something. I don’t want to move until we’re ready.” Grace looked down at what she had written, wondering at it. She didn’t think she’d ever written anything so long since she’d been in school.

And still she could make no sense of it.

“Come on, we know where they are. We can storm the ship, take Salt back—they won’t be able to stop us.” Dominya paced the office, her hair waving behind her. Grace had never seen her this agitated.

“If we go toe-to-toe with the crew of the *Burnsides*, we’ll lose, every time.”

Dominya stopped pacing. “So what do you want to do? Throw up a white flag and ask nicely?”

“Captain Lewis will not kill Salt. Trust me, diplomacy is better in this situation.” Grace wasn’t sure about a lot when it came to Caleb, but she was sure of that. He wouldn’t betray her that way.

Dominya laughed. “That’s what my parents thought.”

Grace pushed her chair back and stood. “You’re going to have to trust me.”

Dominya's lip curled. "I never thought the 'Pirate Queen' would turn out to be such a coward."

Grace tried to tamp down her reaction, but her rage got the better of her. She leaped across the desk and into Dominya, slamming her against the wall.

Grace pushed her face into hers, leveraging one hand against her throat. "Do not call me that. Ever."

Dominya didn't back down. "Then *do* something."

"I *am*."

"Bullshit."

Grace shoved her back, panting. "Send Jethren in."

"No."

"Send. Jethren. In." Grace's eyes, steely and determined, locked with Dominya's.

After a moment, something in the latter pair softened. "Look at us, Grace."

Grace felt her anger leech away, replaced by guilt. "I do trust you, Dom. I love you. I always have."

Dominya brushed a hand across Grace's cheek, and Grace's chest fluttered. "You can let me in. It's always safe, with me."

"I want to."

Dominya leaned in, just in time for Grace to say, "But I can't."

Dominya took a sharp breath and stepped backward. Her mask of anger fell back into place. "I'll get Jethren." She stalked out.

Grace took the opportunity to race back to her desk and pore over her notes. She closed her eyes.

*Why did you have to take him?* She thought.

*Why did you have to ruin it?*

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Caleb awoke to a knife pressed against his throat and Salt's smug, bloodied face.

"I told you she would come for me," Salt's eye was the only thing that glowed in the dark, and Caleb took rapid, shallow breaths, careful not to swallow and cut himself on the edge of the blade.

"Salt!" the voice that spoke his name almost made Caleb bolt upright, in spite of the risk of the blade.

He'd know that voice anywhere.

"Grace?" He said quietly.

Salt narrowed his eyes. "Shut up, Loverboy."

"Salt. Back to the ship. Now."

Salt looked behind him, and Caleb took the opportunity, leaping to his feet and smashing Salt's face against the wall so that he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Caleb fumbled around on his bedside table and withdrew a blaster. Grace didn't move. She just stared at him, arms crossed.

"Stay back!" Caleb hissed.

"I can't do that." Grace said. "You have one of my crew. I need to take him home."

"You will not take our prisoner. Jones!" he spoke into the comm on his wrist. "Granuaile is here!"

There was silence on the other end.

"Jones?"



Grace sighed. “When are you going to realize that I’m always one step ahead of you?”

Caleb stepped forward. “I took your—boyfriend hostage.”

A grin curled across Grace’s features. “Boyfriend? Is that what he told you?”

“Yes! And you’ve got a lot of nerve, telling me you missed me!”

“Really?”

“You aren’t—you don’t—” Caleb sputtered, and real anger started to cross Grace’s features now.

“You do not get to pass judgement on something you do not understand. I did not spend the last few years waiting for you. I am not a static girl waiting for you to bring her to life. I am a queen.”

Caleb wanted to say something back, but he couldn’t think of anything. His finger tightened on the trigger. “You’re under arrest.”

Grace winked, and then she lunged. She grabbed the wrist that held the blaster and yanked Caleb forward. Before Caleb knew it, he was on the ground, Grace’s knee pressing into his back.

“Just say the word,” she half-snarled. “Come with me. I know you don’t approve of this, of what Lee is making you do. I know you’re still in there. That you still love me.”

“What’re you—”

She whispered in his ear. It took him a moment to realize that she was telling him a code, the same code that had no doubt been programmed into whatever tracker they left on Salt. The code that would get Granuaile to come running, at any cost.

Caleb was silent as the gravity of what she had just done hit him. Granuaile had just given him the key to her own destruction. If he shared this code with anyone, it was only a matter of time before she was doomed, no matter how fast and far she ran.

“Grace, I—”

“I will always come for you.” She said softly. “No matter how or when you ask. I will always come for you. Think about that before you decide to set another trap for me.”

Caleb was about to say something back, but she grabbed his head and smashed it into the floor.

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“We have to stop meeting like this.”

Caleb opened his eyes to a shaft of blinding light.

Squinting, Caleb sat up. “Ouch.” His head throbbed as Jones swam into focus, along with the red and white walls of the Medical Bay. “Where were you? I tried to—”

“We were blacked out. Took Hal a full five minutes to figure out what was wrong.”

“Salt?”

“In the wind. Security tapes show him using the Poles, but we couldn’t tell what coordinates he used.”

“Granuaile?”

“I saw,” Jones’ eyes met Caleb’s. He climbed to his feet, clenching the rails of the bed as dizziness overwhelmed him. “I should go review the tapes—”

“Don’t bother. I erased the audio.”

Caleb sat on the edge of his bed, the room still turning around him. “Angela,” he murmured.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Just let me explain,” Caleb closed his eyes.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call up the Commander right now. Save myself and Hal and everyone else before the Admiral decides we aren’t worth the paperwork.”

Caleb blurted out the only thing he could think of. “Plutropolis?”

“What?”

Caleb forced his eyes open. Jones was clutching the sheets of his bed, her shoulders hunched. Caleb went on, “On Plutropolis, you wanted us to break orders. Just like with Hal. Break everything, and screw the chain of command. You wanted to burn that place to the ground.”

Jones looked up at him, her jaw set. “We don’t get the jobs we like, Caleb. We’re Sailors. Our duty is to the Republic.”

“Our duty is to life and freedom. That was the oath we swore. That was what we signed up for.”

“And you think Granuaile represents that? She’s killed hundreds! Our fellow sailors. Innocent people.”

“They’re not the same.”

Jones shook her head. “They *are* the same, Caleb. It’s just killing under a different flag. Murder for a losing team. And you’ve already chosen a side. You’ve been on the same side since you were born.”

Caleb looked down.

Jones grabbed him by the chin, pulling his gaze to hers. Maybe it was the dizziness from his concussion, but she glowed in the harsh fluorescent light “I can’t watch you do this forever. I

can't keep pretending not to notice all the mistakes you've made. You need to figure this out, or I'll stop waiting for you to do the right thing. You got me?"

And Caleb could see the veiled threat clearly in her eyes. "I understand, Jones. You are dismissed."

She left him to sink into sleep, but his dreams were not of the galaxy, the Republic, or the Rebellion. They were not even of Granuaile, the fearsome pirate queen who might be the love of his life.

They were of a young boy and girl holding hands, staring up at a canopy of stars in the cool Kansas night. Waiting for the comforting grey stretch of dawn.

CHAPTER XV  
THE REBELLION

**February 4, 2060**

**Andua**

Babble filled the Council chamber as Grace sauntered in, Salt and Jethren a half-step behind her.

“You’re late,” Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

At the words of their queen, the hubbub died out, leaving Grace and her friends to face the stares of the entire Council. None of them looked particularly pleased to see her.

“I was making sure we weren’t being ambushed.” Grace dipped her head. “You’re welcome.”

Elizabeth spread her hands. She was wearing all white today, which contrasted brilliantly with her dark red hair. Combined with her high-backed chair and the circlet across her brow, she looked every inch a queen, “I trust all my advisors not to reveal my presence.”

“All due respect, Your Majesty, I haven’t exactly had the best track record in regard to trusted seconds.”

“Can we get on with it?” This came from a fleshy purple Andalusian whose voice issued from the grid of tentacles lining his mouth. “The longer this meeting is, the greater chance that one of us is tracked.”

“Which is why it was *especially nice* of me to look around for you.” Grace said, feeling Jethren sigh beside her. “You Andalusians are always so lazy.”

“*Lazy*” his purple eyes bulged.

“Enough!” Elizabeth said. “We have important matters to discuss. I’ve just received information that Commander Lewis will arrive in Apollinia shortly.

The room erupted. All the members started talking at once, several typing furiously into their communicators.

“The commander? Here?”

“Does he know of our position?”

“We need to attack!”

“And give away our position? The base we’ve been fighting to keep secret for over fifty years?”

“I never thought you’d be such a coward, Andius.”

“Oh, bite me, Thoros!”

Grace merely leaned back in her chair and exchanged bored glances with Jethren. She was not concerned with the show Elizabeth put on to make her Advisory Council believe they held influence over her decision-making.

“Quiet—quiet—” Elizabeth finally said, still reclining casually in her chair.

“Are we going to attack?” A woman with bright yellow hair spoke up from her position on Elizabeth’s left. “The lives lost—”

A Yondurian broke in, sweeping his feathered hands in an arc—“Are worthy sacrifices, Jacinda! This is war!”

“Easy for you to say, Thoros! My people will be providing the majority of the air support. We will be the most vulnerable—”

“Air?” what about ground?” the Apollinian representative asked, his black eyes glistening. A few members shifted nervously away from him as his claws clacked on the table. “He’ll burn us in our houses.”

“He is not a dragon, Solan,” Grace said dryly.

“Oh, I suppose you’ve got it all figured out already,” Solan retorted. “You’ll just flit into hyperspace like you always do when anything gets—”

“Solan,” Grace said, a dangerous grin creeping around her lips, one of her hands reaching for the hilt of her blade, “Are you calling me a coward?”

“SILENCE!” Elizabeth roared, her voice commanding the room in spite of her stature. She stood up from her seat so that she could look down on all of them. “I would not have called this meeting if General Patril and I had not already come up with a plan. Patril—”

General Patril, who had been watching the proceedings from the wall behind her queen, stood, sweeping her long blonde hair behind her. Her clear blue eyes blazed with energy, and her hawk-like countenance silenced the remaining mumbles of dissent. “The attack will come when the Commander is in the palace. We will drop the Yondurians into the palace via Granuaile’s escape pods, then utilize our other resources to surround the place. Solan, your people will help the Apollinians to safety, but will not participate directly in the fighting. We want the Admiral assured that Apollinia is a safe place from which to base his operations.”

“So you don’t expect us to win?” Jacinda spoke up.

“Our mission is not to take the palace,” Patril smiled. “But to show that we can. That it is *easy*. Remember, the Rebellion is now nothing more than a series of rumors and acts of piracy--”

“Rude,” Grace muttered.

“We need to be real, but maintain our aura of mystery. Take the palace and burn it to the ground before they gather reinforcements.”

“Ah, I see. So we will use gorilla warfare,” Jacinda nodded.

“Jacinda, I think you mean ‘guerilla warfare’,” Solan corrected. “You mean we’ll use hit-and-run tactics so that we appear everywhere, correct?”

“Yes—” Patril said, but Jacinda interrupted. “Like I said, gorilla warfare. The apes on my planet are bastards. Never give us a moment’s peace.”

Grace covered her mouth with her hand.

“Anyway,” Elizabeth said, “We’re here to divide up the troops. A third of us, led by Thoros and the Yondurians, will go into the palace.”

“My crew will join you,” Grace said.

“I assume you’ll be accompanying them?” Elizabeth asked, looking at her with an air of exasperation.

“Of course,” Grace said. “I always go into battle with my crew.”

“I would think the Rebellion’s most feared champion would want to take a more cautious role—for the morale of the Rebellion.”

Grace tried to keep her voice level. “I don’t abandon my crew. I’m not that kind of queen.”

Elizabeth sighed. “It would be easier to keep you safe.”



“Hey, you want someone who doesn’t fight, Your Majesty, I’m sure Solan’s more than willing.” She could feel Solan turn his reptilian stare on her, but she met Elizabeth’s gaze coolly.

Elizabeth smiled, and for the first time, affection lightened her green eyes. “I always think you’ll prove to be more reasonable, but then I forget who was captain before you.”

Grace shrugged.

“So, the rest will divide into two groups and encircle the palace, with me and Patril leading each faction of that army.”

“You’re fighting, Your Majesty?” Salt interjected, looking stricken.

“Of course I am. The people need to see who leads their Rebellion.”

“Pot. Kettle.” Grace said.

Salt didn’t let the subject go. “With all due respect, you must be at least a few miles from the site of the conflict, as the only living heir to—”

“Salt.” Elizabeth said firmly. “I am fighting with my people.”

Salt turned bright red, and Jethren and Grace exchanged glances.

“You will have to protect me on the battlefield, as your ancestors once did.”

He nodded, his false eye whirring.

“So, Thoros will lead one group, I’ll lead the other, and Granuaile will lead the third.

Does anyone have any questions?”

Thoros raised his hand. “How will we know when the Commander lands?”

“I will signal. Solan has spies in the royal court at Apollinia, and he has promised to alert me whenever the Commander is sighted. Now, go and prepare. And remember, friends. Secrecy is everything. Tell not even your subordinates the time of our attack. We will only have one chance to do this. You are dismissed.”

The rest of the Advisory Council got up to leave, but Grace and her friends stayed behind.

“Sorry I had to challenge you on your crew, there.” Elizabeth said after everyone had left.

Grace shrugged. “I just thought you forgot what I was like. How long have you and Salt been in love?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Salt blurted, just as Elizabeth said, “Since December.”

“And your Council—”

“Still seem to think they can tell me what to do.” Elizabeth shrugged. “It’s better we keep this to ourselves for now.” She looked at Salt. “It’s more fun that way, anyway.”

Salt looked at Elizabeth in way that made Grace strangely lonely. “So we’re going in to steal the secret plans?” she prompted after a few moments.

Elizabeth tore her gaze away from Salt’s, blinking, “Patril, pull the model up.”

Patril tapped her comm, and a hologram appeared. It was of a perfect square, black cube, about a foot wide.

“So that’s the Key?”

“It contains all the sensitive material surrounding Admiral Lee’s rise to power. Where ‘disappeared’ people went, where the bodies are buried. And—” she leaned forward eagerly, as though she could snatch the object from the air. “it contains plans for the next fleet, plans we must disrupt if we’re to succeed.”

“Do you know why he’s constructing this fleet?”

“To destroy us, obviously. It must be a new kind of weapon. Something capable of wiping out entire armies, or some kind of heinous torture device.” She wrinkled her nose. “I would expect nothing less from Admiral Lee.”

“Can you get someone in with the Commander? Have them steal it?”

‘ “No way. They’re all too loyal. Anyone we send in ends up dead.”

Grace swallowed. “So this is the only option.”

“Yes, which is why I’m trusting you to get it. The king wears the box in a necklace around his neck. That’s why the Commander has been summoned to retrieve it. He trusts no one else.”

“Seduce the king, steal his necklace. Wear the necklace. Got it.”

Elizabeth ignored her attempt at humor. “Once you have it, I will call off the attack.”

“No problem. If that’s all—”

“Grace—” Elizabeth held up a hand, her eyes flickering to Salt and Jethren as well. “If you don’t get these plans, the Rebellion will not stand a chance. If you fail, if you die—”

“I don’t fail, Your Majesty.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I hope you’re right. Because if you do not take this device, the Rebellion will have ended before it has begun.”

“So no pressure.” Grace said.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Sometimes I really don’t like you.”

Grace smirked. “But I bring you diamonds, so you get over it.”

“Well, mostly.”

“Come on,” Grace said. “Let’s go get a drink. I always do better before a fight if I can cheat a bunch of people at cards. And it much easier with a mind reader.”

“You know, I don’t mean to be the only voice of reason here, but would it be okay if we *didn’t* get kicked out of a bar for once?” Jethren asked.

“Oh, come on,” Grace said. “Where’s your sense of fun?”

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**February 5, 2060**

**Lute, Apollinia**

While Apollinia held most of its fame for its weapons technology, the city of Lute reflected none of the brutal makeup of the city’s history. As the seat of the government and the king, Lute was an island of the arts, filled with brilliant whitewashed archways and a palace that sat at the top of the hill where the city rested.

Flowers of every color gleamed beneath the weak sunlight that spread out over the city. The air was cool and moist, and it always smelled of a curious mixture of smoke and flowers, a tribute to the artisans who made the beautiful stained-glass installations as well as the space turrets that were mounted on every Naval vessel, capable of incinerating smaller ships with a single shot.

The entrance to the palace heralded a glass elevator, which offered a gorgeous view of the city as it ascended.

The whole thing felt suspiciously tranquil. Like Lute’s capacity for weapons development was as natural as the planet itself. As if implementing technology for the destruction of other beings was natural and organic.

“I don’t see why you had to drag me here,” Caleb complained, as he and Commander Lewis stepped into the elevator to meet King Louis. “I told you I was working on a lead.”

The Commander snorted. “Be glad I have taken you with me. It will be your first success since you started chasing down that war criminal.”

The Commander went on, but Caleb had stopped listening. The mention of Granuaile had sent his mind into a spiral, framed by the last words she’d said to him. *I will always come for you.*

The feel of Grace’s hand in his. The grin on her face when she’d seen him that first time, and knew something he was only guessing at. The way freckles on her skin only stood out when you were a hairsbreadth away, like maps only he could ever trace.

*Grace. Come for me. Save me.*

The elevator dinged, causing the Commander to finally halt his tirade. Caleb remembered when his father hadn’t been so critical, so inclined to see the worse in his son.

But that was when Caleb had been involved in successful missions.

When Caleb had been nothing more than a child, secure in his faith in the Republic and Admiral Lee. Certain that only by joining the Navy would he be able to help people, to serve justice, to keep the galaxy safe.

But Caleb was not a child anymore.

And his father was not his hero, an immovable pillar of success and righteousness.

The guards hurried the Commander and his son through the corridors of the King’s suites, until they finally arrived at the throne room.

Caleb took a deep breath. He needed to focus. If word of what he was thinking ever got back to the Admiral...if anyone knew that he’d had the means to capture Granuaile for months now...

Lee was already one mistake away from mounting his head on a wall. If he knew what Caleb thought now, there probably wouldn't be enough of his body left for his mother to bury.

King Louis of Apollinia fit the description of his race. Glowing blue skin, reptilian black eyes, and long, wicked-looking nails. It was hard to tell age in his species, but the king looked young, without some of the lines and furrows that marked the faces of the guards in the chamber. He wore a long red cloak over a suit of shiny black material. His feet were bare, revealing webbed toes with wicked-looking talons.

He lounged in his throne effortlessly, looking almost bored as the Commander and Caleb stepped up.

Commander Lewis and Caleb both bowed.

"Commander Lewis, Captain Lewis." The king said. His voice was long, lazy, with a near purr at the end of it. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Commander Lewis looked around the room, at the assembled guards and courtiers. "I have matters of a sensitive nature to discuss with you, Your Majesty."

Louis surveyed his courtiers, who looked determinedly at the ground. "Of course." He clapped his hands and stood, allowing one of the guards to help him from his throne. His magnificent red cloak billowed behind him as he walked. "We shall discuss this in my private chambers. Come."

"Your majesty?" An Apollinian courtier who looked markedly older than the king interrupted. "If you'll recall, you just made a commitment for greater transparency—"

The king waved a hand, and one of his guards grabbed the courtier's arm, his claws digging into the skin in warning.

“We can talk about it later,” He said hastily. “I’ll just—um,” He stepped backward, and the guard released his arm. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The king didn’t look back before disappearing through a door on the right side of the throne room. Caleb and Commander Lewis followed, shutting it carefully behind them. Commander Lewis nodded at his son, and Caleb pulled out his communicator, watching the heat signatures of the other Apollinians leave the throne room, one by one.

“We won’t be overheard,” Caleb said finally.

“Good.” Louis threw himself into the chair behind his desk as nonchalantly as he’d been lounging in his throne. “My subjects have become—liberal—of late. Thinking I don’t have their best interests at heart. Thinking my title could be held by *anyone*. As if these so-called democracies are any better off.”

“Well, we do have a choice in how we are governed,” the Commander said.

“Of course you do.” Louis smiled, revealing wickedly sharp teeth.

Commander Lewis inhaled deeply, the way Caleb knew he did when he was trying not to say something he’d regret.

Caleb took the opportunity. “We need to discuss the plans the Admiral ordered. The Key.”

“Yes.” Louis withdrew a long chain from beneath his shirt. The black box waved at the end of it, catching the light and gleaming. “I was wondering when he’d send someone to come for it. The plan is underway, then?”

“Just the initial stages,” the Commander said. “To begin work, we will need to use Apollinian technology. Which is why my son and I are here.”

“Well, lucky for you, my craftsmen have been working on this around the clock.” Louis gave a mischievous grin. “I don’t allow them food until they’ve made progress. It’s an excellent system.”

Now Caleb was the one who had to inhale deeply.

“Your work ethic is appreciated, Your Majesty.” The Commander said formally.

“That’s nice, but I’m still not giving it to you until I’ve been paid.” Louis waggled a finger. “I’m not interested in your ‘acts of appreciation’ unless those acts clink in my pocket, if you know what I mean.”

Commander Lewis sighed. “How much were you offered?”

Louis narrowed his eyes. “Twenty-five.”

“Twenty-five thousand,” Commander Lewis pulled out his communicator and began typing. “And I assume you want this in the Royal Treasury—”

Louis laughed. “Thousand? What am I, a common mercenary? It will be twenty-five million, or it will be nothing. As Admiral Lee promised, after stressing the importance of my people’s technology to the welfare of the Republic.”

Commander Lewis smiled, and only someone who knew him very well would be able to tell it wasn’t legitimate. “Of course. We always want to honor the word of the Admiral. Here.” He pressed a button and turned the screen to the king. “Will that suffice, for your trouble?”

“That seems sufficient.” Louis sniffed, after looking at the screen for a few seconds. “I’ll be right back.”

He took the key and shouldered past the two men, a couple of his guards flanking him. Caleb pulled out his communicator again.

“Why doesn’t he just hand it over?” Caleb demanded, as soon as he left.



“I highly doubt someone as enterprising as King Louis would have stopped with the plans necessary for the fleet.” Commander Lewis said. “I’m guessing he’s been working on something even more powerful, which he’ll sell to the highest bidder at the perfect opportunity.”

“So you didn’t just come here to retrieve the Key.”

“I brought you here to steal whatever King Louis is hiding.”

“But it will be impossibly well-guarded. How am I supposed to even get in—”

“Oh, I’m sure you and your crew will think of something.” The Commander said airily.

“That is, if you even want any of them to survive.”

Caleb watched his communicator’s screen as the dot that represented the King moved about the adjoining chamber, trying to quiet the roiling in his stomach.

If Caleb lost his crew, if he lost *The Burnside*...

If Grace came for him, who would he leave behind?

“He’s coming back,” Caleb said, as the king’s form approached.

“This is the last we’ll discuss of this.” The Commander said. “Do your duty to the Republic. Do not fail me.”

Just as King Louis turned the knob to the door, the Commander uttered his final pronouncement, and Caleb knew, without a doubt, that any sympathy his father had had for him was gone.

“Or I will take you all to the Admiral in chains.”

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Grace, Dominya, Salt, and Jethren dropped onto one of the balconies of the Apollinian palace, the battle already raging around them.

“We need to hurry,” Grace said. “Jethren, can you sense where the Key is?”

Jethren shook his head. “Everyone is shielded or can’t—wait— a guard saw the Commander put the Key in his pocket. He’s getting ready to take an escape pod!” His eyes flew open. “We need to get to him now!”

“Let’s go!” Grace started forward, but Jethren grabbed her arm. “Wait!”

“What?”

But Jethren seemed not to remember what he was going to say as his eyes widened. “Behind you!”

Grace whirled, to find Salt and Dominya engaged in close combat with Apollinian soldiers. They were swift and deadly, their claws as effective weapons as any sword or knife.

And they were ruthless. As Grace watched, one of them slashed across Dominya’s stomach, dropping her to her knees.

With a roar of fury, Grace rushed forward to defend her friend, chopping viciously, just in time to stop the progress of the hand aimed at decapitating Dominya.

As the Apollinian howled in pain, Grace roared again, running her sword through his chest.

Salt sprinted to her side, covered in blue blood. “Stay with her,” he turned toward the remaining two advancing guards, a grin on his face as he wielded his sword. “I’ve got these.”

Grace dropped to her knees, feeling at Dominya’s abdomen. She let out a sigh of relief as she registered the cut as shallow.

“This is why you need to wear better body armor.” Grace said.

Dominya rolled her eyes. “You don’t need body armor if you never get hit.”

“I hate it when you quote me to me,” Grace said. “You should have stayed on the ship.”

“And risk them faking you out with a copy? Don’t be ridiculous.” She pulled herself to her feet, refusing Grace’s help. “Let’s go help Salt.”

But Salt was already grinning over the dismembered bodies of the guards.

“Sometimes I forget you’re Jax’s son.” Grace said. “But you always find a way to remind me.”

“Where’s the Commander?”

Jethren shook his head. “That’s what I’m saying. The Commander has the Key, but King Louis has something else. Something worse. He’s saving it to sell to anyone who pays.”

“What is it?” Grace asked.

Jethren frowned. “I can’t tell. He isn’t thinking about what it is—but it’s definitely on him. He’s already trying to escape.”

*Grace. Caleb’s here. He’s going to King Louis’ chambers. He’s going after the device.*

Grace swayed on the spot, driving Salt to rush forward with concern. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Grace shook her head. “I’m fine.” She exchanged a glance with Jethren. “Here’s what’s going to happen. “You, Dom, and Jethren get to the Commander and take the device.”

“What about you?” Dominya demanded.

“I’ll go for the king.”

“Alone? Grace—”

“Enough!” Grace cut her hand across. “We don’t have time for this. Jethren can help scout ahead for you, and get you an exit as soon as you need it. I can sense people well enough to see them coming now.”

“You can?” Salt asked skeptically. “Since when?”

“Since...awhile.” Grace retorted. “I’ll find my own way out, I promise. But you have to go—now!”

Dominya pulled her aside. “I need to talk to you.”

“This really isn’t the time—”

“I know you’re going to see him. Caleb.”

Grace looked away. “Dom—”

Dominya touched Grace’s cheek. “You love him?”

Grace bit her lip. She nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Dominya shook her head, her braids waving. “You have a history, don’t you?”

Grace nodded.

“But he isn’t your future. I am.”

“You don’t understand. He’s—”

Dominya grabbed her by the back of the head, pulling her in close. “I’m not going to give up on you, Grace. I’m going to fight for you.”

Grace shivered. She closed her eyes.

But Dominya didn’t kiss her. She just said, “I’ll be here when you get back.”

She stepped away, and Grace opened her eyes.

Dominya had already turned away, pulling bandages out of her backpack to cover her wound.

*Can’t I at least come with you?* Jethren asked.

*This is something I have to do alone.* Grace’s stomach was tight with nerves, something she hadn’t experienced since her first battle.

Jethren took her hand. *Ahead, at the end of the hall. Through the throne room. The leftmost door. He has seven guards on him, and Caleb is on his way. I can sense conflict in Caleb, Grace. I don't know what he'll decide.*

Grace nodded. *I love you.*

*I love you, too.*

"As soon as you get the device, get out. I don't want anyone else captured because of me."

"But—" Salt interrupted.

"Get back to the ship. Don't take any risks. You are all far too valuable to the Rebellion."

Grace blinked. "You are all far too valuable to me."

Her eyes met Salt's, lingering on a raised scar on his cheekbone, the product of Caleb's interrogation. Salt nodded, looking grim, and Dominya looked at her hands. "Yes, Captain." They all said.

"Go!" Grace dashed through the double doors that led to the balcony.

She could hear her friends running in the opposite direction.

And Grace tried not to hold on too sharply to the image of them all, standing before her.

The dread that already haunted that memory.

It might be the last time she saw them.

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"You need to hurry," the Commander's voice crackled through the link as the palace crumbled around him.

“I know,” Caleb grumbled. He shouldered his way past a group of confused guards and hauled a piece of masonry out of the way before running on. If the palace collapsed before he got to the plans, he would fail. Admiral Lee would not tolerate any failure.

Caleb had to get to these plans, or he would die.

A chunk of the ceiling crashed into the ground. The power had long since gone out, and he narrowly missed being clipped in the darkness. Only the emergency lighting and the occasional shafts of sunlight lit the way.

No one had expected the rebels to have such numbers, or that they’d be as bold as to attack an outpost where the Commander himself was present. The rebels had always been intent upon smaller tactics, hitting and running before they could be seen.

Who would be stupid enough to mount a direct attack on the seat of the Republic’s most advanced weapons technology?

*She’s here.* Caleb leaped over the masonry and sprinted towards Louis’ chambers.

He hoped that she would be caught up in the confusion of the outside battle, too occupied to navigate the depths of the crumbling palace.

He hoped that she was waiting around the next corner.

*I will always come for you.*

He dashed through the throne room, where some weapon had rent the throne in two, along with the flag that hung above it.

The door to the king’s chambers was wide open, a glow of yellow light spilling into the hallway. Louis must have his own backup generator.

Caleb pressed himself up against the wall, listening.

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“You’ll never find it,” Louis’ claws elongated until they were the length of his forearms.

“Find what?” Grace asked innocently, circling the room to buy herself time. She had to admit, she hadn’t been prepared for claws of this size. If only she’d taken a blaster from one of the guards, instead of being too much of a snob not to rely on her own weapon.

“Legends always tell of your wit, so I’m surprised you’re playing dumb. These blueprints will make me the richest man in the galaxy, not to mention the safest. “

“What will you do when your plans have destroyed the entire galaxy?”

The king scoffed. “You are far too idealistic for a pirate. Weapons are leverage, of the deadliest kind. Universal deterrents. And once my enemies see what I can do…” His eyes flicked to a corner of the room, and Grace narrowed her eyes. “I will be unstoppable.”

Grace tipped her head to the side, as though considering what he said. Then she sunk deeper into her stance. “I will allow you to leave this planet alive if you hand over the blueprints. This is your last chance.”

The king laughed. “You think you can stand against me? You, a mere pirate, all alone?”

“She’s not alone,” said a voice, and Grace couldn’t hide her surprise as Caleb appeared beside her, advancing upon the king with his cutlass drawn. “Hand over the blueprints,” Caleb said. “And the Admiral will overlook your treason.”

“Treason? You think I’ve committed treason?” The king dropped his guard. “I am ensuring my country and my people’s survival. I am doing what you will not—you Republic scum who take our technology and leave us to rot on the fringes.” He spat. “Sending in the Admiral’s lapdog and his son. If the Admiral wants to face me, he can do it himself.”

Grace felt Caleb stiffen beside her, and she did her best not to look directly at him. To try not to read what was in his eyes. Whether he felt—

It didn't matter what he felt. Caleb intended to take those blueprints to the Republic. If Grace didn't stop him, it would mean an end to the Rebellion.

She tried not to think about what that would mean. What she might have to do, if the two of them managed to overpower the king.

The creeping of nerves in her stomach swelled. She could feel every breath she took, every pulse of blood through her veins. She could feel Caleb, a ball of tension beside her.

And it was only because of her nerves, because she was so on edge, that she managed to block the king's slashing attack, aimed directly for her throat.

He was impossibly fast, faster than any of his guards. Faster than anyone Grace had ever faced.

Even with her quick reflexes, he managed to trace a thin line across her throat. The cut burned as though it was laced with acid.

Grace backed up, just in time to block his next blow. Her sword barely left a scratch on his claws, and he was so fast, she couldn't employ any of her attacks against him. It was all she could do to keep him away from her vital areas as he rained down blow after blow, lacing her skin with cuts that stung and burned as though they were infested with bees.

Grace fought through the pain, knowing that she had to find a way to gain the advantage. If she didn't, if she lost this...

She thought of Salt, Dom, and Jethren, who were hopefully above her, securing a device that would mean nothing if this one wasn't taken.

She called for Jethren, knowing he'd be too late to come help. Wanting nothing more than to tell them all what they meant to her, if this was the last time.



The king's hand twisted, and her cheek burned. Grace screamed in pain, ducking away from him and backing up across the wall. It felt as though a hot whip had sliced her face open.

"A thousand cuts, and one that really matters," the king hissed, as Grace fought desperately to maintain hold of her sword, tasting the blood that bubbled down her cheek. The great Granuaile, never defeated in battle."

The king kicked at her elbow with those ripping talons, and for the third time in her life, Grace dropped her sword. She fell to one knee, denial fighting through the pain.

She would not die like this..

She looked up, directly into the king's cruel gaze.

Only to find him shoved aside by a black mass, with shining blonde hair, who quickly put himself between Grace and the King.

Grace could see sparks from Louis' claws colliding with Caleb's saber. She grasped the hilt of her own, wiping a bloody hand on her clothes as she did so, ignoring the blood that was still gushing down her cheek.

Grace rushed in, immediately falling into a rhythm, each of them taking a side and isolating the king's attacks, so that he had to defend against them both independently, one-handed.

And perhaps it was the lightheadedness, but Grace could feel them pressing the advantage. Now it was Louis who was backed into a corner, the very same one he'd been eyeing earlier.

Louis' hand slashed for her face in the same blow as before, and Grace, with a roar of fury, slashed upward with all of her strength.

She and the king watched in horror as three of his long claws, and the fingers attached to them, fell to the floor.

Caleb didn't hesitate. With the king distracted, he lunged forward, impaling the king at the shoulder joint.

With his right arm useless and his left held against his chest defensively, Grace leveled her sword at his throat. She grinned in satisfaction as he cringed away from the heat. "Where is it?"

Louis shook his head. "I'll never tell you."

Grace lunged forward with her blade, so that it started to burn his throat. "Then you are useless to me."

"Go ahead, Granuaile. You will never find it." The king laughed in her face, black blood turning his teeth even darker.

Caleb twisted his sword. "Tell. Us."

But Louis just smiled, and Grace knew what he was going to do before he did, but she was powerless to stop it.

She watched in horror as the king leaned forward, allowing the blade to slice deep into his throat.

The light left his eyes. Only a flap of skin left his head attached, the wound automatically cauterized from the blade.

"How are we supposed to get the plans now?" C Grace yanked her sword out with a snarl of frustration. She stepped carefully around the body, tapping at the wall in the corner. She couldn't feel any hollow spots.

Grace sent out a scan. The walls appeared solid. Nothing was hidden in them.

Caleb was saying something about the throne room when a huge crash resounded through the palace. At the same time, Jethren said, *The palace is collapsing. Get out!*

And Grace knew what she had to do, but that did not make it any harder.

“Leave it.” She said.

Caleb stopped. “What?”

“They will only cause destruction, no matter which one of us obtains them. The palace is on the verge of collapse. Let Louis’ weapons be buried with it.”

“I need those plans. I need to give them to---”

“The Admiral? Your father?” With a pang, Grace thought of Jethren and the others, who were leaving the palace. Which meant that they must have succeeded in getting the key. Her head spun. “Your father—”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed, and he pulled out his communicator. “Commander, what’s your 20?”

There was nothing.

“Commander Lewis, this is Captain Caleb Lewis, requesting a status update. The palace is collapsing. Have you made it to your escape pod?”

Silence.

Caleb took a shaky breath, and Grace could feel his heart breaking. “Dad?” He sounded so young, as young as he’d sounded that last day. “Dad...where are you?”

Grace bit her lip to keep a sob from choking out. She had done this. She felt her arm go numb, and she wasn’t sure if it was from the blow or the shock, the horror that sang through her veins as she watched Caleb fall apart.

And there was still more that she must do.

Caleb hurled the communicator against the wall, where it shattered into pieces. “What have you done? Grace—” His voice cracked at the end, and Grace could feel it. That fracture in the air.

Something had broken between them.

Grace clutched at her wounded arm. “We had to secure the plans for the fleet. It was the Rebellion’s only chance. I—” *I didn’t want them to hurt him. I hoped they wouldn’t.*

But Grace had always known that to be a false hope. Always known that the Commander would not go down easily. That he would make them kill him for the plans.

She had known she would break Caleb’s heart.

And she could see it, the pain etched all over his face, so much worse than the blood that had started to dry, more horrific than the body on the floor.

“You did this.” Caleb said.

Grace’s hand went to her sword’s hilt. “There are things bigger than you. Bigger than us.”

“He was my FATHER!” Caleb shouted.

“I’m sorry.” Grace whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

But Caleb didn’t hear her. He was already lunging, all his rage and pain behind the blow, and Grace’s sword remained sheathed, and there was no way she could stop it—

She felt the blade enter her abdomen with a rip of pain, a tearing agony that slid through her flesh with deliberate and devastating force. It felt like her very soul had been transformed into this pain, and it was fragmenting inside her, building into a paroxysm of images and flashing lights—

Grace could feel herself dying.

One last time, she called out for Jethren. *Tell them I'm sorry. And I love you all.*

Then everything went black.

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Caleb wrenched his sword out of Grace, his stomach twisting at the sickening noise.

*What have I done?*

His head spun and he turned, resting his hands on his knees.

He took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself down.

Though he could not see her in his field of vision, her boot stood out clearly. Black, with a tiny heel, and treads on the bottom to help her grip the floor. Twitching while she writhed in pain.

Caleb's heart was in so many pieces, it felt like there was nothing left to put back together.

He was floating, his consciousness untethered, and he couldn't move.

But after a while, a dead calm took over. Like a muffled blanket had been cast over his senses, relocating even his pain over his father's death, his guilt over the woman slumped in front of him, the woman who had broken his heart, who was his heart, his entire soul, that he had ripped through...

Caleb knelt over Louis' body, grimacing at the scent of his blood, searching frantically through the pockets, no longer fearing the horror of the corpse. No longer anything but a sailor.

Caleb had come here with a mission, and the mission was still not completed.

He could feel a curious stinging on the edges of his eyes, but he ignored it, blinking the pain away with everything else.

Caleb rooted through the king's clothing, running his hands atop even his skin. King Louis had absolute faith in his ability to fight. He'd never expected not to make it out of here alive.

Which meant that Louis would never have let the plans out of his possession.

And, beneath the cauterized wound in his neck, Caleb felt it.

It was the work of a moment to slice a new incision in his neck, and as thick, black blood sluggishly flowed out, Caleb reached inside the king's body until he felt it.

The edge of something that was neither skin, nor bone, nor flesh.

Metal.

With a sickening squelch, he removed a silver box, no larger than his thumb.

Caleb felt like he should be feeling triumphant, but he only felt the most enormous sense of relief.

He groped for his communicator. But he couldn't find it. Dimly, Caleb recalled someone who had looked very like him, flying into a rage and smashing it against a wall.

The blaring silence of a message never answered.

As the palace shuddered around him, Caleb pocketed the box and started to walk away.

But before he could leave the room, as if in protest at his blanket of sameness, something pulled his gaze back to the woman slumped against the wall. Something burst through that blanket of numbness. A flicker of light, a hint of unending agony.

And he looked at her.

Her eyes were still open, and her chest still moved. A smear of blood followed the course of her body down the wall, dark red in such contrast to the black of the king's.

Her eyes were glazed over in pain, and she looked without seeing.

Caleb bent down to look into them. One last time.

They were gray, tinged with green at the edges. Surrounded by a halo of wild hair that even a ponytail hadn't been able to contain. Framed by long lashes that fluttered as she struggled to stay conscious.

That had batted at him alluringly in the bar. Widened when he took her hand.

Drawn him in...

He remembered a girl with long, wild hair, tugging him into a treehouse. Laughter in wild bike rides through streets surrounded by cornfields. A hand in his beneath a blanket of stars.

Caleb was crying now, heaving, shaking sobs, sobs he hadn't done since he was young enough to remember not to. He was crying so hard, he could barely see through his tears and swollen eyes.

His *heart*.

His heart—

“Go.” She choked out the words so softly, he wasn't sure she'd heard him.

Caleb knelt down, cradling her body in his hands. “This is my fault,” he whispered. As if to punctuate his words, the sound of shouting erupted over the rumbling of the palace, amid the blasts. “I won't leave you,” he said fiercely, hugging her tighter. If he didn't leave, then she couldn't die.

And if she couldn't die, then he hadn't killed her.

“Caleb,” she whispered. “I am so sorry.”

“Just give me one minute,” he whispered. “Just one minute.”

But she shook her head, biting her lip. “All of this, the Rebellion. I—I had to—”

“I know,” Caleb whispered.

“You need to go,” she said. “You will die if you stay.”

“Then I will die.”

Grace let out a laugh that turned into a cough, and before she got her breath back, a trio had appeared at Caleb’s side.

It was her friends. Salt, his blonde hair encrusted with dirt and dust, staring wide-eyed at Grace, his lip trembling. The girl with the white braids, who looked only at him, chin raised, daring him to take her on. The Daarthuurian who had met him for the first time on Pompeii, all those years ago. *For her, Sailor. Just this once.* He dropped to his knees beside Grace, his hand reaching out to touch her forehead.

The Daarthuurian looked at the others, then at Caleb. “If we get her out now, there is a chance. “

Caleb nodded mechanically, shifting his arms beneath her. “Do you have a way out?”

He nodded.

Shaking, Caleb got to his feet. The girl stroked Grace’s cheek.

Salt moved to his other side, one hand snaking under Caleb’s, so that they both held her up.

The Daarthuurian moved in front, pulling a bo staff from its position on his back. “She is weak. You need to move her as little as possible, or she will lose more blood. And then nothing will save her.”

As one, they all started out of the room.

The journey seemed to take twice as long as it had before. They were heading for the front of the palace, the steps that opened into the battle, whose sounds seemed to be dying down now.



The doors had already been blasted open. A purple escape pod rested at the bottom of the steps, ringed by a dozen or so Rebels. Just behind them, the Navy seethed like a living thing, encroaching bit by bit upon the Rebels' ground.

In the sky, Caleb could see the shadow of Naval ships approaching. His crew, wondering where he was. Coming to rescue their captain.

He looked down at Grace, who was paler than he'd ever seen her. Somehow, she was looking at him more fiercely than she ever had. A challenge.

Caleb looked back at her, hesitating, still out of sight of the battlefield below. He was a step away from the light, and all that it would bring. He could see himself, getting into their ship. Leaving his whole crew behind.

But there was a blackness in his heart, a blackness surrounding the thrust of a sword and the silence that had taken the place of his father's voice. And there was Jones and Hal, who needed him.

The Admiral, who would finally trust him again, after knowing what he'd done to Granuaile.

He nudged Salt. "Take her."

Salt didn't hesitate, carefully taking Grace's weight in his arms. Grace sighed with the transition, as though he had confirmed something.

And Caleb ran ahead to the ship that was landing on the edge of the courtyard, sprinting at it with all his might, moving easily through the crowds of sailors, who let him pass without hesitation.

The ramp lowered to reveal Jones, beckoning furiously.

Caleb took her hand, and she pulled him into the ship.

The last thing he saw before the ramp closed on them was Jethren laying about with his bo staff, clearing a path to the ship. He watched the other pirates helped Salt lift their captain and carry her onto the pod.

Caleb could feel their grief, even when the scene was replaced by the cold black of the *Burnsides*' shell.

He realized suddenly that Jones was saying something. "--your father?" she finished.

Caleb turned toward her. "What?"

Jones took a deep breath, her eyes liquid with regret. "The Commander," she said softly. "He didn't make it, did he?"

Caleb shook his head, tears starting again on his cheeks, and Jones pulled him in.

Caleb's mind got that detached feeling again as he curved his body over Jones' the images of the last hour playing in his head like the disconnected segments of someone else's life.

He stepped back from Jones' embrace, groping in his pocket.

He felt that creeping numbness settle over his chest as he withdrew the little black box that had cost him so much. Distantly, he felt Grace call out to him. *I will always come for you. I have missed you.*

But Caleb knew that no one could save him.

"I need to see the Admiral."

## CHAPTER XVI

### CONCLUSION

*The Pirate Queen* confronts what a story of true love means in a universe fraught with destruction, and it complicates the notion of power as a masculine concept through its depiction of Queen Elizabeth's Rebellion and the character of Grace O'Malley.

While I originally intended several different outcomes at the close of this novel, the story ran away with me (as it tends to do) in the concluding chapters. At the close of the novel, as Caleb brings destructive capabilities to the Republic and therefore cements his loyalty to the Admiral, it seems apparent that Caleb is on an irredeemable path to destruction. His rage and grief at Grace's role in his father's death and his desperation to cling to the only consistent thing in his life have driven him into the arms of the Republic, perhaps permanently.

However, the novel also hints, through Caleb's failure to kill Grace and his role in her salvation, that Grace and Caleb's story might not be necessarily doomed to destruction. Instead, it suggests that the very rage that Caleb holds in the last chapter is the last gasp of his loyalty to the Republic and its totalitarian power structures. Caleb must consider that his own betrayal will mean instant death for Hal, Jones, and the rest of his crew. Disillusioned with the Republic and in full realization of his feelings for Grace, Caleb's position, in spite of his assured favor with Admiral Lee, is even more precarious than it was at the novel's start.

Captain Grace O'Malley ends the novel as a force of nature, all the more formidable because of her wounds and the rage that lurks behind them. Grace now faces a Republic with the means to her easy and efficient destruction. And while Grace still loves Caleb, the damage he has done to her physically and personally cannot be forgotten or undone. Her experience with Caleb

will cause her to reevaluate her relationship with Dominya, which she had thought dissolved.

Does Grace truly love Caleb, or is she holding onto the past?

The final battle at the end of the novel closes this particular chapter of Grace and Caleb's conflict, but it does not end the story. In the next installment, I will explore the impact of Grace and Caleb's final confrontation, and whether they can overcome all that still divides them.

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